

Sounding Art

Eight Literary Excursions on Electronic Music

to anyone who cares to listen

Sounding Art

Eight Literary Excursions on Electronic Music

Katharine Norman

COPYRIGHT PAGE

Sounding Art

Eight Literary Excursions on Electronic Music

Katharine Norman

Introduction

Acknowledgements

Sounding... ...spaces

1. [Concrete tales and touching times](#)
[Xenakis, Philips pavilion, small and tactile sounds, microscopic time and Henri Bergson. Magali Babin, Ryoji Ikeda]
2. [Several infinities \(an emblem book\)](#)
[metaphors of perspective/space and flight, Bachelard, Da Vinci, works by Luc Ferrari, Jonathan Harvey, Luigi Ceccarelli, Phill Niblock]

Sounding... ...worlds

3. [With no direction home](#)
[maps and cartographers, documentary sounds, sound ecology, composed listening. Peter Cusack, Barry Truax, Paul Lansky, Francisco Lopez]
4. [The same trail twice: Talking Rain with Hildegard Westerkamp](#)
[transcribed interview of a walk in the rain with HW, and text on subject of recording, listening, re-hearing]

Sounding... ...voices

5. [Speak/Listen](#)
[radio 'voice' of authority, radio art, voice, unheard voices. Lotta Erickson, Evelyn Ficarra, Cathy Lane, Pamela Z]
6. [Figure-toi...: Listening to *Sous le regard d'un soleil noir* by Francis Dhomont](#)
[multi-layered analysis, issues of translation, aural inner worlds, psychology of sound, schizophrenia, R.D. Laing]

Sounding... ...edges

7. [Beyond the limit and the line](#)
[noise – as metaphor, as pornographic sound, as transgression. Sarah Vaughan, Glenn Gould, Autechre, Merzbow]
8. [The Endnotes](#)
[appropriation and plunder, cover versions, pop, technology as the subject. John Oswald, Terre Thaemlitz, Martin Tétrault]

Appendix I – texts for *Sous le regard d'un soleil noir*, Francis Dhomont

[Appendix II – track listing and acknowledgements for accompanying CD](#)

Bibliography

Recordings

Index

List of figures

1. *Annunciation*, Leonardo Da Vinci
2. still from the video *China*, Phill Niblock

Introduction

This book is a deliberate provocation, and a call to ‘stretch your ears’ - as Charles Ives, that great experimental listener, once wrote.

Electronica, microsound, lowercasesound, electroacoustic music, computer music, idm, analogue music, post-digital music, glitch, acousmatic, noise, sonic art... The approaches to making questing music with the assistance of technology are now a multifarious explosion of different kinds of listening. The use of technology itself can no longer define a genre. And for that I am very glad, since people – *listening* – make music happen.

The time has long gone when ‘electronic music’ could be relegated to a two-page afterthought at the back of a music history book. And the time has more recently gone when any all-encompassing ‘history of electronic music’ could be adequately covered by one book, or that anyone would want to try. And this particular book is not a history of anything: it is an invitation to listen differently to music as sounding art. By which I mean music as an art that can ‘sound out’ – and sometimes change – the way we listen to both our inner and outer worlds. My focus is on sounding the depths of these worlds through electronic music. But though I talk about a great many pieces of music, none are intended to stand for certain repertoires or genres, or anything other than themselves. And this book is an unashamedly personal response, to both my own listening and the outer reaches that drive my interest in sound, as both composer and writer. Most of the works I talk about are for ‘sound alone’, composed for the space between your ears - only a few are intended solely for the concert hall. Although I think there is a broad range of approaches among the works I talk about, I make no attempt at any kind of systematic survey. There are many other books written and to be written on the different, and glorious, varieties of approach in ‘electronic music’. And even those two words are a problematic restriction, employed here as a useful shortcut. In this book electronic music is part of a wider brief, just as being a composer is, I believe, part of a wider responsibility than just dealing with sound.

The chapters are paired by approach or subject matter, and the whole sequence traverses its own unorthodox arc towards a kind of disintegration. Each chapter reflects its subject in the way that it is written and structured, and each tackles various linked obsessions. But that is by no means to be taken as any kind of progression, and the chapters can be read as stand-alone extended essays. Feel free to go in any direction.

To help you along your way, here is a brief description of each chapter’s territory. The Contents page also provides some keywords for those in search of named composers or specific areas of discussion. I would also advise a visit to the Bibliography for sources and more conventional reference texts. Above all, please do take time to listen: the enclosed CD of examples is an essential and vital element of this book. I am immensely grateful to all the composers who so willingly agreed to both share their work and allow me to write about it.

Chapter 1 is, on the face of it, an exploration of small and tactile sounds, taking Xenakis’s *Concret PH* as an inspirational starting point for a variety of small histories. This is interwoven with stories about the early history of sound technology. As my

writing attempts to illustrate, history can be viewed as a mass of small but significant moments, often conflicting, but coalescing over time to say something larger through retrospective listening.

Chapter 2 is an emblem book. One subject under discussion is metaphors of flight in works for instrument and tape and, in one case, a work for film and music. But there is also a rather quirky analysis of perspective in a painting by Leonardo Da Vinci, and a celebration of Gaston Bachelard's philosophical writing on poetic metaphors for ascent.

Chapter 3 concerns listening, in particular to the sounds of the real world recontextualised as recording, and in music. As listeners we all map out our personal response to the world (whatever world we may be traversing at the time). This chapter is also about cartography.

Chapter 4 is an interview with composer and researcher Hildegard Westerkamp, in particular a discussion of her work *Talking Rain*. It is also a walk in the woods, and a reverie on different kinds of listening.

Chapter 5 is about radio, radio voices and compositions that subvert the voice of authority in one way or another. The writing also has its own programme, whose segments are linked by a mystery female voice. This chapter is a call to listen differently to 'other' voices that still, too often, find it easiest to broadcast outside the mainstream of electronic music.

Chapter 6 is a multi-layered endeavour that analyses a listening response to Francis Dhomont's *Sous le regard d'un soleil noir* alongside an interview with the composer. Dhomont's work concerns the experience of schizophrenia, and my writing tries to mirror that concern with its own psychological confusion, to a point where reality, language, speech and the inner world just won't translate.

Chapters 7 and 8 are tied together in a mutually confused way. Chapter 7 is about noise as an immersive music, and the structure and tone of the chapter is its own illustration. Chapter 8 is about plunder, appropriation and cover versions, and what these might intend. This chapter doubles as the 'endnotes' for Chapter 7 (as befits a chapter about appropriation, it was originally intended for some other purpose). I think the only way to explain these chapters more fully is to suggest you read them.

Perhaps you will find at least some of what I've written inspiring, engaging, boring, different, aggravating, fascinating, pretentious, imaginative, foolish, creative or even just mighty strange. Like all of us concerned with electronic music as a sounding art, I hereby share my listening, and I look forward to yours.

Katharine Norman
London, January 2003

Acknowledgements

It seems to me that acknowledgements often end by thanking the long-suffering spouse or partner. But this is a slightly unconventional book, and I would like to thank Jonathan, my husband, first and foremost. Without his encouragement and belief that this book was a good idea, I never would have started to write in the first place (so you have him to blame as well).

But, of course, there are a huge number of others to thank wholeheartedly. Financial and professional support for research and writing was enabled by grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Board, the University of London Central Research Fund and a sabbatical leave from Goldsmiths College, University of London. Among those in the UK who supported my various applications I would like especially to thank Peter Manning and Roger Wibberley. A term as a visiting fellow at Princeton University let me renew my love affair with the Firestone Library. I am grateful to all who helped to make that possible, especially to Scott Burnham, Marilyn Ham, Paul Lansky and Paula Matthews.

Thanks to Scott and Paul also for taking a peek at bits of the book-in-progress, expressing enthusiasm and suggestions, and for generally make me feel it was worth a try. This goes also for Daniel Biro, Li-Chuan Chong, Andrew Deakin, John Lely, Alan Shockley, Ian Stonehouse and others who I apologise for forgetting. Grateful thanks to the many online acquaintances I made, who generously provided me with information and places to look for more.

Many of the musicians whose works feature also took the trouble to communicate at length, and were frequently inspiring – my especial thanks to Sean Booth, Luigi Ceccarelli, Terre Thaemlitz and Barry Truax. But my enormous thanks to *all* the people whose work I discuss, for making such fascinating music in the first place. I would like to thank in particular the two composers who I interviewed at length: Francis Dhomont for listening behind my stumbling French, and Hildegard Westerkamp for talking through a walk in the rain. Both have become firm friends, despite these indignities, and both have supported me far more than I can say. Thanks also to all those friends who helped to keep me together – in particular to James Pritchett and Frances White for curry and gardens, and more.

Writing this book was an experience that has enabled me to clarify my thinking about both music and my own position as a composer in the world. I thank that experience for helping to initiate a big leap during the last chapter, from an academic life in the UK to a more precarious freelance existence on an island near Vancouver.

Katharine Norman