ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC, PLURALISM, AND THE INTRACTABILITY OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL LIMITATION

Kyle Gann described music pluralism well in his Rey M. Longyear Lecture from 2008.[1] In the lecture, Gann, who considers himself first and foremost a composer (as do I), identifies pluralism through a critique of academic musicology. "By turning toward gender studies, vernacular musics and oral and nonwestern traditions, and the history of audience reception—all those telling fields of evidence that traditional musicology had pointedly excluded—[musicologists] broke away from the stifling Great Man narrative and revitalized the field."[2] Yet, as Gann states further, art music composition has continued to progress. The musicological turn away from the narrative of Western classical composition does not mark the end of the American and European narrative of composed music. Rather, it appears commensurate with the emergence of multiple compositional styles and a diverse web of *narratives.* After the rise of minimalism in the late 60s and early seventies

> the word *pluralism* began creeping into the conversation. Minimalism grew more popular, but not everyone converted to it. Almost as a reaction against it, a noisy scene of free improvisation grew up around John Zorn and Elliot Sharp in New York City. Personal computers made it possible for any teenager to make music from samples of other recordings. Orchestra composers discovered New Romanticism and, exploiting the nonlinearity of style quotation, ventured into postmodernism. Serialism morphed into New Complexity around the cult figure of Brian Ferneyhough. DJs started making art music by spinning discs. Twenty years later, all of these styles are flourishing, with no one of them gaining particularly more of the market share than it had at the time. … At some

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[1] see Kyle Gann, "The Longyear Lecture," *American Music* 26, no. 2 (2008): 141. The Longyear Lecture is an endowed lecture series in musicology supported through the University of Kentucky.

[2] Gann, "Longyear Lecture," 144-145.

point, everyone eventually looked back and realized that Leonard Meyer
had been right. There *was* no dominant new style.[3]

Gann ultimately sees the contemporary hallmarks of pluralistic compositional practice

as the arrival of Leonard Meyer's speculative, and ultimately prescient, prediction that

the musical style of the future would be "'characterized not by the linear, cumulative

development of a single fundamental style, but by the coexistence of a multiplicity of

quite different styles in a fluctuating and dynamic steady-state.'"[4] In fact, Gann's

description necessarily leaves out a host of other differences of compositional practice,

some of which are even internal to the stylistic movements he cites.

Given our focus on electroacoustic music, we too must recognize that the

musicological turn that we are here today advancing in relation to this sub-discipline is

both a testament and implicit acknowledgement that the diversity of electroacoustic

styles and techniques have both proliferated and grown increasingly niche. Consider for

a moment how the narrative of early electroacoustic music has shifted— away from

stylistic schools and methodological debates of total serialism vs indeterminacy toward

the cultivation of particular technology-specific disciplines: acousmatic fixed media,

machine listening, algorithmic composition, spatial audio, HDLAs, and live diffusion,

interactivity, mixed music, network music, sonification, visual music, controllerism,

sound art, and on and on. As my old mentor and co-inventor of the Synclavier, Jon

Appleton, recently said: "it's all so technical now." I argue that the proliferation of a

technology-oriented 'dynamic steady-state' in electroacoustic music enables composers

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[3] Ibid., 143-144.

[4] as quoted in Gann, "Longyear Lecture," 143.

to 'niche down' independent of any pretention toward a specific stylistic, programmatic, or extra-musical agenda. A pluralist technological landscape of choices for the production of electroacoustic music enables us to conveniently ignore the ideological presuppositions inherent to our acceptance of pluralism itself. To reveal that ideological baggage, we must simply ask "what knowledge enables the composer or the consumer to make a qualified musical choice, to know the effect of (ostensibly) 'new' electroacoustic music under the conditions of pluralism?" Or perhaps more concisely: "how do we know the way or ways that 'new' electroacoustic music is actually new?"

Reactions to Pluralism

On one hand, we'd like to endorse pluralism whole-heartedly in terms of its consumer-oriented benefits. A pluralistic compositional universe is one of possibility, choice, and freedom. In such a place, the range of audiences for a wide range of music continues to expand and make way for new stylistic differences, technologies, and socio-cultural significations. However, such acceptance begs a very important question: are we accepting musics as they appear on the basis of understanding what the *actual differences* are, given a knowledgeable meta-perspective? Or, are we accepting *distinction* for distinction's sake as a form of cultural tolerance, because we have no way of knowing otherwise, which is to say, of knowing the difference? Is pluralism really just a shared commitment to a "you do you" mentality? This is my fear.

Culturally, I think we demonstrate a willingness to embrace different stylistic branches of musical activity, which pluralistically appear to follow their own path, without much consideration given to how the branches differentiate, exist in relation to each other, and perhaps even hybridize. If we begin to consider such branching we may view

pluralism according to a second, more radical, *relativist* perspective: all distinctions of musical style are of equal value precisely because we cannot know how or why that style appears the way it appears from a perspective outside of the socio-cultural context that values it. This idea underlies Jacques Attali's assertion that, "outside of a ritual context or a spectacle, the music object has no value in itself. It does not acquire one in the process that creates supply."[5] Music has no objective cross-cultural exchange value. So given the current stylistic differentiation of electroacoustic music, how do the various (sub)cultures that value any one technological approach comport, vis-à-vis each other? If we maintain that any new approach is correlative with the potential emergence of a subculture or commodity market that values the style, then the absolute value of one approach relative to another cannot be obtained. To value differentiated musical practices differently is akin to valuing the people who appreciate that music differently.

Ultimately, these two reactions to pluralism can be summarized in the following way:

- 1) Pluralism is to be embraced because "more choice is always good". We benefit as both composers and listeners from the unmitigated extension of choice and freedom to indulge in a multitude of styles, technologies, and aural experiences.

- 2) Pluralism is a situation we are forced to accept because we have no way to know what any given music is outside of the context of listeners who value it and, therefore we cannot be anything but accepting of a listener's prerogative

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[5] Jacques Attali, Noise: The Political Economy of Music, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 106.

to listen differently— pluralism is the horizon of our musical experience

because of the *relativism* inherent to any perceived aural difference.

Increasingly, the first reaction appears to no-longer comport with consumerist

experience; too much choice can indeed be a problem, as the psychologist Barry

Schwartz has described in his 2004 book the "The Paradox of Choice". His idea is

homologous to what we now often discuss as "decision fatigue". Harder, though, is to

confront the second perspective. The remainder of this paper grapples with the

intractability of the relativist interpretation, in search of a chink in its philosophical armor.

Pluralism and Postmodernism

It is important at this point to make clear that the relativist perspective and

postmodernism go hand-in-hand. Postmodernism is one name for the set of

contemporary (socio-)linguistic and bodily considerations that Alain Badiou has

circumscribed and called 'democratic materialisms';[6] materialism, because "the

individual as fashioned by the contemporary world recognizes the objective existence of

bodies alone"; and democratic because, "the contemporary consensus, in recognizing

the plurality of languages, presupposes their juridical equality." If we identify

Stravinsky's neo-classicism as the exemplary postmodern-event in music, we see how

the historicizing of musical consumption itself is integral to that which is produced.

When we consider the vast range of historical musics and electroacoustic technologies

that one may choose as a condition for compositional activity, then what knowledge do

we have to inform such a choice? This question articulates the postmodern

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[6] Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009)*,* 2.

electroacoustic composer's task: to choose in full acknowledgement of the fact that any choice is made under the condition of insufficient knowledge concerning the range of possible choices and their possible interpretations. In thoroughly rejecting the notion of absolute mastery, or knowledge of a universal aesthetics (viz. modernism), postmodernism places the composer securely within a particular frame of reference inside the discursive territory that preconditions any compositional activity. The postmodern composer is cut off from an objective view of the Musical, from knowing how her work will be heard; she is required to acknowledge her position of limited knowledge (perspective) on the (often primarily technological) territory her work aims to affect. As Kyle Gann has described elsewhere as "reflexive self-effacement", [7] the contemporary composer often presents herself as *genuinely* ironic towards the musicality of her work; she is forced to act *as if* she does *not* believe in the 'Great Man' narrative of Composers, while nevertheless composing, often with increased technical rigor, in the hope that her propositional music will affect Music's broader discourses.

Epistemological Limitation: Three Encounters

Encounter 1: Social Consumption and Production

The sociological tendencies for electroacoustic practices under the condition of postmodern, relativist thought reflects, following Žižek, "an exact inversion of Marx's formula [for the German *ancien régime* that 'only imagines that it still believes in itself']: today, we only imagine that we do *not* 'really believe' in our ideology—in spite of this imagined distance, we continue to practice it."[8] The *not*-Composer still produces work,

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[7] Kyle Gann, "What Composers Talk About," Arts Journal Blogs: Post Classic, accessed April 21, 2009, http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2009/04/what_composers_talk_about.html.

[8] Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 3.

but only in such a way as to accentuate her everyman status—to leverage a degree of

false modesty against her nevertheless operative ideology of becoming a Great

Composer.

Žižek (by way of Maynard Keynes) provides us with a precise articulation of how

contemporary compositional activity engenders self-relating. If we consider how the

production of music (composition) is conditioned by our consumption of the territory we

seek to affect, we may draw a direct analogy with free-market enterprise, whereby:

> expectations are part of the game: how the market [for music] will react
> depends not only on how much people trust this or that intervention, but
> even more so on how much they think *others* will trust them—one cannot
> take into account the effects of one's own choices. Long ago, John
> Maynard Keynes rendered this self-referentiality nicely when he compared
> the stock market to a silly competition in which the participants have to
> pick several pretty girls from a hundred photographs, the winner being the
> one who chooses girls closest to the average opinion: "It is not the case of
> choosing those which, to the best of one's judgment, are really the
> prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the
> prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our
> intelligence to anticipating what average opinion expects the average
> opinion to be." (1) So, we are forced to choose without having at our
> disposal the knowledge that would enable a qualified choice, or as John
> Gray put it: "*We are forced to live as if we were free.*" (2)[9]

If we consider the economics of musical consensus-making as homologous to Keynes'

depiction of the stock market, this "third degree" echoes the very conditions of

groundless self-relating which arise between the composer and her own investment in

composition as a means of achieving a successful (useful) intervention within the field;

her investment is founded upon not the 'real' territory of composition, but rather, the

composer's map of others' maps of composed music, as it all immanently appears to

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[9] Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce,* 10. The referenced footnote (1) reads: "John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money,* New York: Management Laboratory Press 2009, Chapter 12." The referenced footnote (2) reads: "John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux 2007, p.110."

her. Here, we incur Baudrillard's notion of the *precession of simulacra* or "the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal [, whereby] the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it."[10] When we reflect upon the reality of the compositional procedure, it becomes impossible to even think in terms of absolutes anymore. We are instead faced with a multitude of differentiated appearances and interrelations that precede any definition of what composition actually *is*; we are staring at nothing more than a "desert of the Real"——a void.

What is of utmost significance in Žižek's use of Keynes is how this third degree, the extension of relations into a 'hyperreal' or a virtual space divorced from objective determination, is presented as an 'epistemological limitation'. **We are "forced to choose *without* having at our disposal *the knowledge* that would enable a qualified choice."** Or, to put it in compositional terminology: the composer is forced to pursue a particular compositional prerogative without having the knowledge to determine what makes such a choice objectively verifiable as a 'good' choice; we can merely "anticipate what average opinion expects average opinion to be." The horizon for composition is thus to compose in an attempt to maximize the comportment between one's own listening and the intersubjective norms that condition one's own listening.

If modernism's failure is an inability to universalize esthesic access regarding the formalized procedures of poiesis, then postmodernism appears as a full embrace of the impossibility of ever doing so, of the discursive reality of the map without recourse to any territory (ground). What any given composition is is conditioned by what the

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[10] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166.

composer thinks others will think the work to be; the inability of the composer to take all perspectives into consideration, to *know* the totality of music's possible appearance, is an epistemological limitation, a limitation on knowing the 'real' effect of any given compositional choice. The composer cannot herself be the model for the listener (consumer) she imagines composing for.

Encounter Two: Music Semiotics

Music semiotics also presents a way of understanding the structural limitations on a composer's ability to *know* the reality of the effect she may cause.

The history of music, as well as my own personal compositional history, is littered with attempts to represent, model, imitate, and even allegorize extra-musical subjects. From early liturgical music up to contemporary pieces exploring data sonification and cellular automata, there is a demonstrated compositional preoccupation with representing the extra-musical. As interesting and sublime as the result of these efforts may be, there is a disjunction between intention (on the part of the composer) and interpretation (on the part of the listener).

Consider the example of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony and its fabled program of representing the 'countryside'. "Referring to conversations that he allegedly had with Beethoven himself, [Anton] Schindler claims that Beethoven intended to affix programmatic titles to all of his compositions – after the fashion of the Pastoral Symphony – in order to make his intentions explicit."[11] This point belies a pre-suppositional acknowledgement that music is by definition more varied than text in its

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[11] F. E. Kirby, "Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony as a 'Sinfonia caracteristica," The Musical Quarterly 56, no. 4 (1970): 60.

meaning, and thus amenable to (if not requiring of) explication. The necessity with which the ambiguous notion of 'countryside' (as a place of normalized experience) appears in the 6th Symphony forces us listeners to confront how meaning is conveyed through music. To do so brings us into the territory of music semiotics.

In approaching the question of *what* and *how* music means, we stumble upon the, "tension between the apparent validity (at the level of listening) and the apparent invalidity (at the level of empirical analysis) of music's symbolic capacity."[12] We all attest to music's ability to make us *feel* something, but the sketchiness with which we are able to localize this feeling or in fact define the structure(s) through which it operates suggest that music may very well be, as Patricia Tunstall asserts, rearticulating Saussure: "not a system of signs but a system of signifiers without signifieds."[13]

Tia DeNora has made the argument that our confusion regarding the complexity of musical meaning stems from the misinformed assumption that the linguistic premise of an "ideal speech situation" serves as an appropriate model for understanding music as a system of signs. In an ideal speech situation, "what is said is equal to what is meant is equal to what is understood."[14] Yet, such a speech situation is truly ideal, as it is not reflective of any real world linguistic exchange, let alone the conveyance of musical intention. Quine's Indeterminacy of Translation, Gricean Maxims, and the notion of Common Ground in psycholinguistics all serve to confirm the premise that such an ideal speech situation is impossible. Language users select words and comprehend

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[12] Tia DeNora, "How is Extra-Musical Meaning Possible?: Music as a Place and Space for 'Work'," *Sociological Theory* 4, no. 1 (1986): 84.

[13] Patricia Turnstall, "Structuralism and Musicology: An Overview," *Current Musicology* 27 (1979), 54.

[14] DeNora, "Extra-Musical Meaning," 88.

their significance according to a multiplicity of meaning and a reliance on context. For example: saying "it's hot in here," may in fact be understood as a hint that someone open a window.[15] In terms of semiotics, it is therefore necessary to reassess the referentiality of language as an ideal model for music. The listener actively constructs meaning out of the signs with which they are confronted. Meaning is in this way achieved rather than received.[16]

If the multiplicity of subjective and contextual meanings invariably come into play, is it futile to try and make compositional intent explicit? DeNora says no, but her discussion belies the larger ramifications of the argument she presents. If we, as listeners, are searching for musical meaning, then:

> to find meaning in an object is *believing* that the object in question is inherently meaningful and that it deserves to be taken seriously, that it is significant. The primary object of study, when focusing on musical meaning is to examine the way in which belief is inspired so that the listener listens 'in good faith' and thus, cooperates in fleshing out the sketchiness of the music so that it appears to mean something.[17]

Hence, the listener who gazes into the object for meaning finds only the listener. This shift in focus underlies what Leonard Meyer has called the "preparatory set," or the framing of an experience such that our belief that we should expect an encounter with musical meaning ensures that we find it;[18] we are pushed towards finding meaning based around our set of expectations for meaning, which are informed by attuning

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 90.

[17] Ibid., 91.

[18] see Leonard B. Meyer, "Meaning in Music and Information Theory," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 15, no. 4 (1957).

ourselves to the "contextualization cues" of music.[19] These cues are often performative, social, gestural, and even architectural. The phenomena surrounding music act less as a ground than as an integral and interactive component of the object they frame. DeNora hints at this stating: "perhaps the main reason we have so little trouble making sense out of just about anything,... is that we go to 'work' at meaning construction 'given the materials' at hand, i.e the perceived context of which the phenomenon is also a part and with which it reflexively reacts."[20] In other words, the extra-musical is always-already a part of phenomenal musical experience. Framing the listening experience helps to make explicit its semantic reference and to make such reference appear necessary because it is always-already grounded in experience. Again, we find that any pretense to musical objectivity is purely ideational; it is retroactively constituted through the subjective lens of the listener.

If we consider the semiotics of listener agency from the perspective of the composer-as-listener, the object of aural perception (the sign) becomes even more complex. The composer, in listening to her own work, is a listener towards the meaning she intends. So once her compositional activity becomes *about* framing a subjective listening experience (rather than attempting to encode objective meaning into the object itself) the explicitness of musical reference is moot; experience itself becomes objectified as that which should be meaningful. The frame for such experience is

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[19] see John J. Gumperz, "Sociocultural Knowledge in Conversational Inference," in *Linguistics and Anthropology*, ed. M. Saville-Troike. (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1977) and Tia DeNora, "'When You're Trying Something on You Picture Yourself in a Place Where They Are Playing This Kind of Music:' Musically Sponsored Agency in the British Clothing Retail Sector," The Sociological Review 48, no. 1 (2000).

[20] DeNora, "Extra-Musical Meaning," 90-91.

nothing other than how the composer has sought to contextualize her own listening. This is to say, that the composer's gaze itself becomes both the subject and object of any meaningful listening.

It is here where we explicitly re-encounter epistemological limitation, as derived from semiotics, which undercuts any pretense toward universalizing composer intention: the composer cannot *know* if or how the average listener will achieve meaning in her work, because she herself is part of the process of reading meaning into it. Any consistent totality of meaning is therefore compromised because she cannot take into account how her own listening imbues the work with meaning, a meaning that may or may not comport with an average listening. Her only recourse is to consider the responses (critiques) of her peers and to subsequently attempt to frame (with recourse to rhetoric and the work's contextualization cues) a particular listening for herself without any hope that she may *know* the actual effect on others, given her intent.

Encounter Three: Philosophical Reflexivity

In both of the previous encounters, self-relating behavior has reared its head to severely limit a composer's ability to know her music. The problem that relativism poses to musical knowledge is, in fact, structural, and is most fully revealed by cultivating an understanding of philosophical reflexivity vis-à-vis *place*.

Composition and listening must *take place.* We may discuss each term here (symbolically) in the abstract, but insofar as we are talking about activities that happen in the world, they must be situated in both space and time. When outlining the spatial characteristics of sound, Yi-Fu Tuan made a passing aside to Roberto Gerhard's notion of form in music: "form in music means knowing at every moment exactly where one is.

Consciousness of form is really a sense of orientation."[21] This remark of course reflects Jonathan Kramer's notion of "linear" time as it appears in music with functional harmony.[22] The relationship between place and music is thus immediately framed as a matter of *self*-relating, of knowing "exactly where one[self] is." Insofar as knowledge is a matter of thought, we incur the problem of thought attempting to gain traction on *being* (under the guise of where one *is*).

To consider music and place is, therefore, to consider the relation between thought and being, a consummate philosophical problem. As Ray Brassier concisely notes: "thought is not guaranteed access to being; being is not inherently thinkable. … The fundamental problem of philosophy is to understand how to reconcile these two claims."[23] Addressing this problem directly may provide us with some insight as to the full weight of the limitation on our ability to know *anything*, let alone the reality of the music we write.

To begin outlining how musical meaning may be known, we should allow Brassier to frame the problem further:

> For we cannot understand *what* is real unless we understand what 'what' *means,* and we cannot understand what 'what' means without understanding what 'means' *is,* but we cannot hope to understand what 'means' is without understanding what 'is' *means.*
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> This much Heidegger knew.[24]

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[21] as quoted in Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 15.

[22] see Jonathan Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988).

[23] Ray Brassier, "Concepts and Objects," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism*, ed. Levi Bryant et al. (Melbourne: re.press, 2011)*,* 47.

[24] Ibid.

The appearance of Heidegger in this context is important. Philosophically, we may identify Wittgenstein and Heidegger as "the two emblematic representatives of the two principle currents of 20th century philosophy: analytic philosophy and phenomenology."[25] Both the analytic and phenomenological currents, which extend from Wittgenstein's focus on language and Heidegger's focus on consciousness, respectively, are premised upon the subject's inability to talk about, let alone access, a world independent of the subject's gaze; the subject is *always-already* immersed in the world, a world predicated upon the subject's correlation to it. Here, the word "correlation" is not of passing significance; it is the heart of the matter. Quentin Meillasoux, in his increasingly notable book, *After Finitude* (2008), identifies *correlationism* as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other."[26]

Meillassoux's notion of correlationism may be further understood as a term that encompasses issues of *reflexivity* or our finite relation to the world we *always-already* find ourselves in. Reflexivity describes the intractable condition of being a finite Being situated in the world with a necessarily limited perspective and horizon of experience. As a consequence of this condition, our being in the world mitigates any claim we make about the world. Any claim regarding language is expressed through language, and any claim about the properties of objects themselves is constituted through the subjective

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appearance of those objects as given to sense.[27] We cannot gain an absolute

perspective over objects, let alone ourselves; for the more we strive toward objectivity,

the more it implicates the subjectivity inherent to our access of those very objects we

strive to know in and of themselves.

Reflexivity reflects the deep philosophical problem facing us today, a problem

that is the core tenant of our postmodern, relativistic crisis: the un-tenability of thinking

the reality of objects in and of themselves, independent of their givenness to us. As

Hilary Lawson describes it, "to insist that we are confined by the limitations of our own

problematic, is to be confined within those very limits."[28] This horizon of thought, which

appears in Kant as a consequence of the dissolution of dogmatic Metaphysics (rejection

of the ontological proof), remains predominate across theoretical discourses within the

humanities, ranging from anthropology to art. Thus, identifying reflexivity as operative,

given our electroacoustic interactions with the world, only reinforces the limitation it

imposes upon our ability to *know* our subject. Our contemporary, postmodern condition

is epistemologically ungrounded, for we cannot find a Ground upon which to ensure that

our thought carries any significance in regards to the objects of our thought. Claims to

objectivity are treated as untenable. We are therefore forced to engage in the whole-

sale endorsement of its converse: the subjectivization of phenomenal appearance, and

the relativistic "juridical equality" of any given appearance in relation to another. Such

subjective prioritization begins and ends with the individual, and when expanded and

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[27] Hilary Lawson, *Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 9.

[28] Ibid.

viewed as operative within a larger social, discursive space, it is contingent upon a balancing of inter-subjective agreements.

The consequence of finding ourselves in this "desert of the Real" is not merely that art becomes ungrounded, but that science itself presents no threat to correlationist thinking; one need merely assert that scientific principles and mathematical laws appear *for us* as absolutes. To think the being of universal laws is thus to reaffirm the priority of thought over that which appears. Therefore, science becomes just another form of discourse; and even our technical electroacoustic research is ultimately reduced to a matter of inter-subjective agreement regarding not only the perceptual results of new electroacoustic tools, but also the core tenants of any purported scientific methodology (controlled experimentation, falsifiability, etc.).

On the Possibility of Electroacoustic Music Beyond the Limitation

If electroacoustic music is perhaps most threatened by the epistemological perils of reflexivity and finitude, given the expanded domain of technological research and the accompanying proliferation of choice, then it is also perhaps the domain most capable of inverting the problem and proposing an alternative to our relativist woes. How then might we proceed in consideration of a music that may function as pluralism's difference? I have some ideas, but perhaps its best to leave the theory behind for a moment and proceed with a 'speculative' example, an example of an electroacoustic piece that does not appear to be limited epistemologically.

A 'speculative' example: Max Neuhaus' *Times Square* seems to provide us with just such an example—a work of art that appears not to be dependent on knowledge regarding either its poietic procedure or even its existence. In Neuhaus' own words, here's a description of the *Times Square* piece:

The work is located on a pedestrian island: a triangle forked by the intersection of Broadway and seventh avenue, between forty-sixth and forty-fifth streets, in New York City's Times Square.

The aural and visual environment is rich and complex. It includes large billboards, moving neon signs, office buildings, hotels, theaters, porno centers, and electronic game emporiums. Its population is equally diverse including tourists, theater-goers, commuters, pimps, shoppers, hucksters, and office workers. Most people are in motion, passing through the square. The island as it is the junction of several of the square's pathways, is sometimes crossed by a thousand or more people in an hour.

The work is an invisible, unmarked block of sound on the north end of the island. Its sorority, a rich harmonic sound texture resembling the after ring of large bells, is an impossibility within its context. Many who pass through it, however, can dismiss it as an unusual machinery sound from below ground.

For those who find and accept the sound's impossibility through, the island becomes a different place, separate, but including its surroundings. These people, having no way of knowing that it has been deliberately made, usually claim the work as a place of their own discovering.

Neuhaus took knowledge out of the equation. The work itself has no meaning for us to

know. Nor can there be any expectation for the listener to even know of its existence.

To encounter *Times Square* is to encounter the possibility of listening. We may decide

upon and categorize the object we hear or we may possibly fail to hear anything at all.

The work means nothing beyond one's own mediation of the object's contingent

existence, its *being* anything at all. If we begin to consider our aural experience of the

world, we may ask: what are the possibilities for a composed aural experience to

function similarly? If a composer is limited in her ability to specify a particular

understanding of the composition she composes, then perhaps she should reconsider

the presupposition that the composition is itself whole or in any way complete. In order

to reconsider this presupposition we must develop a theory not of epistemological

limitation, but rather of *ontological incompleteness* in relation to aural experience. I

propose that, in a functional affinity with many of Robert Irwin's 'site-conditional' pieces, the work of Max Neuhaus (and specifically a reconsideration of *Times Square*) must serve as a point of departure for developing a more speculative line of inquiry into the possibilities and interdictions of technologically informed and ontologically incomplete musical practice.

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