

## AESTHETICS OF ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC

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(First published March 31, 2018)

It. *Estetica della musica elettroacustica*; Fr. *Esthétique de la musique électroacoustique*; Germ. *Ästhetik der Elektroakustischen Musik*; Span. *Estética de la música electroacústica*. This expression refers to a branch of the aesthetics of music which deepens musical thinking on electroacoustic music and the conceptual frameworks in which it can be located. Electroacoustic music, not least from an aesthetic point of view, has been studied above all by composers and much less by philosophers. For this reason, the label “aesthetics of electroacoustic music” has often been used not in reference to a specific theoretical context (subjective genitive) but rather in reference to the aesthetic qualities and the poetics of a work of electroacoustic music (objective genitive).

### ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC

The expression “electroacoustic music” was used for the first time in the 1950s, in reference to the newborn *musique concrète* and *Elektronische Musik* (to which we may add Italian electroacoustics). Since then, “electroacoustic music” has been used to refer to all music whose creation, production and/or circulation calls for the use of electronic or digital instruments or devices.

The world of electroacoustic music is vast, and within it can be identified “regions” and “subregions”, as Barry Schrader (1982) defined them: tape music, electronic music, *musique concrète*, acousmatic music, synthesizer music, computer and digital music, live/electronic music, music for live electronics, music for tape and instruments, music for electronics and instruments. These subgenres belong to the category of so-called “cultured” electroacoustic music. To these must be added the great region of “extracultured” electroacoustic music which, in its turn, gives rise to countless ramifications: rock, pop, reggae, dub, hip-hop, rap, house, techno, rave, to which further internal variants may be added.

AN AESTHETICS *IN FIERI*

This specific aesthetics, being applied to a relatively recent, very mixed musical galaxy, is a field of investigation *in fieri*. The aesthetics of electroacoustic music has no tradition behind it (if not the general tradition of musical aesthetics) and has not yet found a clear position in the aesthetic studies. Hence, it is necessary to pose a preliminary question: is it possible to speak of "aesthetics of electroacoustic music"? This field of research presents different difficulties from those regarding other fields, because it seems to have an opaque, undefined identity. In the 1990s, the Italian musicologist Gianmario Borio subordinated this specific aesthetics to the formulation of a theory of the new music: "An aesthetic theory of electronic music has not yet been written, and it is debatable whether this can be done independently of an aesthetic theory of New Music" (Borio 1993: 77). However, Borio's observation may prove to be paralyzing.

For a start, we may attempt to define the "subset" of aesthetics of electroacoustic music starting from the set of which it is a part, namely musical "aesthetics". Musical aesthetics may be understood in a narrower or in a broader sense. In the first case, it is presented as a "reflection on music at a philosophical and systematic level" (Fubini 2003: 155). This definition cannot be applied to aesthetics of electroacoustic music, since it is a matter of a research space that cannot be reduced to an all-encompassing, systematic, unitary theory of this musical genre. From a broader perspective, "the conclusion must be less apocalyptic and must be simply that today musical aesthetics has taken on new orientations and tends to break up into many different areas of research into musical experience considered in its complexity multifaceted aspects" (Fubini 2003: 156). Another Italian musicologist, Antonio Serravezza, suggests marking two different limits to what we call "aesthetics of music". On the one hand, "the field does not include all reflection or conceptualization on music, but its historical constellation, namely investigations in the perspective of sensibility and of experience"; on the other, "it does not coincide with what pertains to the formally 'aesthetic' sphere, i.e., to a branch of philosophical work, but [...] is indicated in a differentiated range of expressions that speak different languages and sectorial frameworks" (Serravezza 2004: 102-103). Would one possible aesthetics of electroacoustic music, if we use Serravezza's analysis, suggest more an "investigation in the perspective of sensibility and experience" or "a differentiated range of expressions that speak different languages and sectorial frameworks"?

The nature of electroacoustic music situates philosophical reflection on it at the point of intersection between these two possible interpretations. Electroacoustics (given the very wide range it covers, from John Cage to Karlheinz Stockhausen, from Pierre Schaeffer to Toru Takemitsu, from Pink Floyd to Luciano Berio, from Iannis Xenakis to Jean-Claude Risset, from the Beatles to contemporary DJs) poses problems that cannot be faced only with traditional views of understanding of musical phenomena. Electroacoustic music – which, above all in the "extracultured" version, has often been undervalued by music theoreticians – may contribute to the relaunch of the aesthetics of music. In this way we may avoid the risk that the aesthetics of music remains blocked in debates much like the *disputationes* of ancient memory, the *querelles* that, though fascinating, can say little about the transformations in course in the contemporary artworld and lifeworld. Joanna Demers has stressed these aspects, not least in relation to the pressure of new disciplines, which seem much more fierce and "up to date" than aesthetics and especially the

aesthetics of music: "With multicultural, feminist, gay and lesbian, and postcolonial studies continuing to flourish and generate torrents of ethnographically based scholarship, aesthetics cannot help but appear out dated, if not objectionable". Hence, it would be appropriate to formulate "an aesthetic theory of recent electronic music, a theory that acknowledges the interconnectedness of aesthetics with culture and society" (Demers 2010: 4).

Aesthetics of electroacoustic music, then, may offer musical aesthetics the opportunity to follow music in its paths of "infiltration" among the trends of contemporaneity. But how? On the basis of what conceptual system? One possible aesthetics of electroacoustic music, moreover, might be structured starting from two configurations: *formalism* and *realism*.

Musical formalism arose with Eduard Hanslick (2010), who saw music as an object of analysis to be studied in the same way as the natural sciences study their objects of analysis. This means depriving the emotional content of all importance in the development of a judgment: the aesthetics of emotions is thus replaced by the aesthetics of form. This configuration, however, needs to be revised. In the study of a musical work Hanslick's approach rejects any reference to all that is extraneous to it tracing a clear line of demarcation between musical dimension and extramusical dimension. This distinction, in the case of electroacoustic music, would be unacceptable, because it goes against its very nature.

Regarding realism applied to the philosophical analysis of technological music, this takes us back to a broader discussion, involving the very essence of the work of art. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century art was "de-artized" and music was "de-musicalized". In this sense, electroacoustic music produced two important novelties: a) as compared with other arts it made room, within itself, for techno-scientific research (IT, logic, mathematics, physics, etc.); b) it gradually but definitively abandoned the contemplative dimension, which serial music had begun to call into question. Passing from the contemplative to the performative dimension implied putting in the foreground the "formal" level of the work, with an ever-increasing attention to the level of the "real". On this, Elizabeth Hoffman, by retrieving Rancière's theses (2004) on the "political" nature of aesthetics, takes electroacoustics back to a musical genre capable of (re)creating a profound relation between the individual and her environment. The relationship between aesthetics and politics – so Rancière – is seen in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art participate in the "distribution of the sensible" and in its "reconfiguration", redistributing spaces and times, subjects and objects, the ordinary and the singular. For Hoffman, electroacoustic music is to be situated in this conceptual framework, which sees it as a central artistic practice in contemporaneity. It maintains a relationship with everyday "reality" "through large, widely perceivable themes and approaches to sonic materiality, and more important, to uses of technology, that translate as particular aesthetics, and that help us to come closer to an understanding of our evolving values and visions. The particular aesthetics may use distinct syntaxes, rooted in uniquely summoned sonic features or concepts. As descriptors, 'languages' and 'genres' are more palpable and comprehensible terms than 'styles' (personal utterances) for audiences trying to participate in sonic dialogues – though personal styles contribute back to the evolving discourse at the higher level, re-infusing and reflecting on our relationship to our environment" (Hoffman 2011: 6-7).

In conclusion, another element should be taken into account in the context of an aesthetics of electroacoustic music, one which we may define as pleasure, in a context of "economy of selection" (Roads 2015), or as "pure sensorial perception". Some forms of electroacoustic music are presented as the musical variation of so-called *pensiero debole* (weak thought), of a worldview that leaves behind any attempt at foundation or constitution. The *Grund* is broken up into splinters of meaning that speak not to reason but to sensorial perception. The result is the irrationalistic abandonment to perceptions, to the *fluxus*, to the panorama and to the sound context as such, valid in itself, representative of nothing, no longer the bearer of meaning.

Aesthetics of electroacoustic music can be fitted into the fissure that contemporaneity has created between unity and fragmentation, abstraction and realism, approaching an everyday dimension which in the broader context of the figurative or performative arts already has a long history and a philosophical legitimation, but which in the musical context seems thus far to have been excluded, perhaps because it was considered disqualifying. Answering the demand for the reality of the present time may instead represent a new modality of communication between musical dimension social dimension, through the mediation of the machine.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

G. Fronzi, *Aesthetics of Electroacoustic Music*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2018 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/spring/AestheticsOfElectroacousticMusic.pdf>,

DOI: 10.7413/18258630005.

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