Without Walls

Nick Fells

Department of Music, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QH.

Email: nick@music.gla.ac.uk

One of the ways I view my compositional practice is as a continuous line between *acousmatic* and *acoustic* means. Along this line there are of course many ways of getting sounds organised and sent out into the world for someone to hear.

I find it increasingly useful to think about a distinction between *space* and *place*. This is discussed at some length by Michel de Certeau, in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and it seems to have implications for compositional and performance practices. De Certeau defines *place* as 'the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence…a place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions' (de Certeau 1984:117). He goes on to assert that 'space is a practiced place' (ibid.), in the sense that our own spatial practice (e.g. movement) allows us to realise a place, allows us to perceive locational relationships. An awareness of this everyday process of mapping is impinging on my musical thoughts, particularly in terms of finding a place for my musical practice in the context of our contemporary culture.

To play devil's advocate for a moment: in these days of mp3 and multimedia, musical

creation seems to be easily seen by some as *content creation* for the global

communication network. Music itself becomes information, and pressures on the notion

of music as a spatial experience increase. Degrading technologies increasingly convey

information apprehended in degraded lo-fi sonic environments devoid of a relation to

place, real or imagined. In this context, it seems essential to produce work that invites the

audience to partake in spatial practice, in de Certeau's sense. Performance and

performative listening become ways to realise place, and as such require a (real) place in

which to occur (though I would be the first to say the formal concert is unsatisfactory as a

way to present contemporary music, but that debate is beyond the scope of this short

paper).

I'd like to consider some of the points along the aforementioned line. Towards the

acoustic end, people with the physical means to produce sound are put directly into a

place, into which they project their sound. The physical origin of the sound, with its

associated and necessary theatre of gesture, becomes part of the place and part of the

spectator-listener's performative spatial experience. This could be an important factor in

including the spectator-listener in the process of the work and enabling an understanding

of it. We spectator-listeners can find some resonance, to a greater or lesser degree, with

the performer's experience of the sending out sounds into the place.

Considering the *acousmatic* end, I'd like bring up a question posed by Simon Emmerson

when discussing Telemusik: '*what makes the piece sound right?*' (Emmerson 1989: 139).

Having gone through composing periods that, in my opinion, led to pieces which didn't sound right, I think I am more aware now of some possible answers. However, my answers take the form rather of composer's rules of thumb, whereas I think Simon was driving at finding cognitive roots for this perceived rightness (I apologise for this evasiveness!). There are three issues I want to talk about. One is to do with *algorithmic composition,* another is to do with *reference points*, and the other is *soundscape*.

Simon's question asks why Telemusik is 'successful in spite it's overt pre-conception' (ibid.), by which he means the use of formal rules and the Fibonacci series in particular to construct the work. In my own compositional practice, I've used similar means of construction. This kind of means has been called algorithmic composition (Landy 1994: 49), though this term can mean different things. For instance, it can mean something similar to Stockhausen's uses of temporal measurement; some rule could be used to organise notes into melodies and melodies into larger chunks, producing a score given to a performer to play later. But it could also mean, for example, using an iterative formula to produce grain streams with some common rhythmic-textural characteristic, and which subsequently become subject to transformations which might be performed intuitively in real-time. The first application governs what Jonty Harrison calls the architectonic structure, the abstract relation of sets of parameterised events to one another (Harrison 1998:119). The second rather generates sonic material that is then sculpted according to spectromorphological considerations. Harrison (2001) has also described this distinction in terms of music that deals with the quantitative and that which deals with the qualitative aspects of organising sound respectively.

My music employs both approaches. After a time, I've come, eventually, to a point where I can find a useful balance between the two, though I always try to keep in mind Leigh Landy's comment about algorithmic processes: 'make sure we can hear them.' (Landy 1994: 50). This is important if the process purports to be something that structures the work; the structure needs to be audible if we believe in Schaeffer's primacy of the ear.

My second rule of thumb concerns *reference points*; these can form anchors for the rest of the sonic material in the piece. I try to construct the piece so that at each point the material is moving towards or away from one or other reference point. The nature of such references might be association or mimesis, or in lattice-based music a particular harmony, rhythmic gesture etc. (in fact it could be any gestalt which is associated either with a real source or other similar established gestalts elsewhere in the work). In my work I tend to want to reveal these references gradually, or conversely, to obscure them gradually. In my soundscape pieces, this is the main forming process (for instance, in *riversongs* (1999), where the pitched bells of a distant clocktower gradually emerge from a swirling vortex of similarly-pitched granular streams).

Any discussion of *soundscape composition* inevitably begs the question: what does it actually mean? Soundscape composition could be about materials, using sounds from the soundscape of particular locations in order to represent those places. This is partly true in my work, but it is also a way of treating form and the function of sounds which encourages spatial practice for the listener. Soundscape composition includes elements that invite others to partake in our own spatial experience, in the way the sounds of a

particular location interact with our imagination, perception and memory. Riversongs certainly functions in this way; the unadulterated recorded soundscape of the particular location or time appears fairly rarely, though those appearances are crucial as references. They act as narrative pointers and include the listener (including me as first listener) in the process of the piece, and they enable the piece to function as stimulus for an inclusive shared experience.

In conclusion, I would say that this concern for an inclusive experience is now my primary motivation as a composer, whatever form the compositonal activity takes, and whatever means are used to create, sculpt and disseminate the sonic material. Ackowledging the spatial experience of the spectator-listener is an essential factor.

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