

### **3. Recorded Music and Public Spaces**

"So it comes about that the very undertaking (radio) which seeks to make people like music by giving it a wider and wider diffusion, very often only achieves the result of making the very people lose their appetite for music whose interest was to be aroused and whose taste was to be developed". [Stravinsky, Poetics, p. 142]

Stokowski's concert of electronic music at the Museum of Modern Art on October 28, 1952 was a foreshadowing of things to come. The point in the program when live performers were dispensed with and the audience was left facing a single loudspeaker must have been particularly disturbing, shaking the very foundation upon which our musical tradition is based -- the concert performance.

A concert, by definition, has always depended on the presence of at least one performer. Those wishing to hear the performance must accommodate themselves to the performer's schedule -- i.e., be at a specific place at (more or less) a specified time. In return the performer agrees to be at the same place at the same time, and to play, in most cases, what has been advertised. This all makes such perfect sense that it seems rather silly to outline it. Until Stokowski's concert, that is. At a concert of electronic music where the loudspeaker is the only performer, the implicit agreement between performer and listener is turned inside-out: a recording is, by definition, just one copy of a pre-existing performance; there is, then, no reason, logical or practical, why a

public should be made to gather at a specific time and place when, in fact, that same recording (or a copy thereof) can theoretically be "performed" at any time and any location. For the price of an admission ticket a cassette tape and program notes could be mailed to every interested concert-goer. The loudspeaker can make a public event unnecessary, and when that happens the event itself can seem rather hollow and insignificant.<sup>i</sup>

When The Phillips Corporation commissioned Varese's Poème Electronique for its pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair, it (or rather whoever was in charge) displayed an unusual understanding of the relationship between a recorded object and the space in which it is played back. Recognizing that a recorded performance is not bounded temporally or spatially (as is a live one), they could allow the piece to be played continuously (via 400 loudspeakers) within the space of the pavilion for an audience who entered, moved about, and exited at will. Being that the pavilion was constructed to show off the achievements of the Phillips Corporation, one suspects, and not as a concert space, Poème Electronique was not the centerpiece, but neither was it "background music" in the usual sense of the word. The piece commands too much attention, has too much presence for that, and part of that presence has to do with the fact that it makes no pretense toward documentation. We may recognize in the piece certain component sounds -- the church bell, human voices -- but for the average visitor to

the pavilion, the experience of these sounds, however interesting or entertaining, might not have been regarded, or recognized, as a strictly musical one. One identifies no musical instrument, because nothing behaves like one: there are no tunes, chords, or local "rhythms". The piece, then, could be heard as integral to the space, because there were no other references. In contrast, a recording of a symphonic work, say, either preexisting or newly-commissioned, would have posited the existence of some other space, thereby competing with the exhibition space; the listener, I believe, would then have dealt with the recorded space as an intrusion, and relegated it to a position of secondary importance. When the aura of concert performance is removed, as was the case with Poème Electronique, the piece's beginning, middle, or end is defined, in one sense, as a function of the recording material (the physical (and literal) beginning and end of the tape), and in another, of the personal itineraries of individuals passing through the Phillips pavilion.

But Poème Electronique was surely composed as well for a stationary listener, a concert-goer, able (and willing) to take in the entire piece at a single sitting, with no interruption. The particular occasion, or circumstance, that happens to give rise to a composition is sometimes irrelevant to the composition qua composition; music composed to accompany some other event (other than the music

itself, that is), can very often be transferred to the concert hall with no loss of context (a Bach organ prelude, Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, Mendelssohn's music for A Midsummer Night's Dream). Which brings us back to the question just raised by the Stokowski concert: what is the best place, or way, to hear, not just electronic music, but recorded music in general? Given that the entire range of auditory experience is possible -- say, a harpsichord piece amplified to a crowd of 1,000, or Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand" played back via headphones to a single listener -- do we, as public and private listeners, actually make these distinctions with regard to the music we listen to?

Muzak is an interesting case in point, possibly the first demonstration that music in public spaces might take on a decidedly different character along purely functional lines. In other words distinctions aren't made on the basis of whether the music is recorded or not, but on the use to which the music is put. As a Muzak executive explained: "Muzak isn't music to listen to, it is music to hear. Muzak is functional music. There is some sort of correlation between Muzak and air conditioning; both are part of the Environment."<sup>ii</sup> These remarks may appear strange to the listener of concert music, but the Muzak Corporation was quick to realize that for some people (and their bet is that it's most people) music is often best enjoyed as an accompaniment, or diversionary tool, to some other activity;

weren't opera boxes favored meeting places for financial and political dealings, among other amusements?<sup>iii</sup> And wasn't Beethoven purported to have excoriated the royalty again and again for chatting and otherwise carrying on business and social affairs while he was playing?

Muzak's agenda, unlike the Philips pavilion's, is, ironically, closer to that of the traditional concert hall, at least to the extent that its audience is a captive one -- the "workforce" located in offices, shops, and factories. It is interesting that in these environments Muzak's "programs" consist of fifteen-minute segments of music followed by fifteen minutes of silence, the official principle being that "the maximum you should play in any working area is about half the time the employee is there."<sup>iv</sup> The effect of these alternating fifteen minute chunks of sound and silence is that the listener can only be aware of starting and stopping, never of a musical composition. Unlike the public listener who is free to move throughout a space, like in the Phillips pavilion, a stationary listener must have their entrances and exits built into the sound itself.

Interestingly enough, Edward Cone, in his Musical Form and Musical Performance, describes, if somewhat fleetingly, the ideal ballroom dance music as that which never stops -- leaving it up to the individual dancers to start and stop, enter and exit, when they choose.<sup>v</sup>

What can we make of Max Neuhaus's piece which "lives" underneath a grating at Times Square, and plays continuously for anyone who happens to be above it? Or of the Shostakovich piece written for and amplified throughout the Leningrad cemetery and memorial to the victims of the Nazi blockade of the city? These works may or may not succeed as musical entities outside of the environments for which they were originally intended and it's not important that they do. What distinguishes these works from Muzak, beyond the fact that Muzak is (or at least has been) based on pre-existing, recognizable, tunes and these others are original works? Do we (yet) have such criteria at our disposal? My own piece Tunnel Rat was conceived for a specifically defined space: an installation of a 1950's "fallout shelter". A recording of a male voice reading an original text was to be continuously transmitted within the small space to an indefinite, but large, number of transistor radios. In using many speakers of different types and sizes, distributed throughout the "performance" space, the piece eschews the hegemony of the stereo (or quadraphonic) configuration, and of the concert stage, and mimics the conditions of a radio broadcast, in this case of a Conelrad station. What is left of the piece after the dismantling of the installation? Does the piece persist as a piece if transmitted within any space? In what sense is transmission (broadcast) meaningful or necessary out of context; i.e., is

a simple playback of the source tape a reasonable representation of the piece, an accurate "performance"?

The broadcast media themselves raise their own set of issues with respect to recorded objects and the spaces into which they are transmitted. With the radio or television receiver as our sole link to the musical (or any other) performance, all questions of authenticity become irrelevant, almost old-fashioned. Who can tell whether a broadcast is "live" or not? (Yet the apparent authority live broadcasts have over taped ones is still apparent in the inflected manner by which live broadcasts are announced: the "with you, live, from ... (location of your choice)). The goal of music technology indeed seems to be, as it always has been (and as digital synthesist Richard Cann once remarked), to "instantly record what the composer hears in his head."

I suspect these issues will rattle around for some time to come, possibly until an entirely new technology, as revolutionary as recording, comes about. There is an irony in that once recordings cease being documents -- once they are freed from the necessity of imitating real-time events (and referencing some other location) and are heard as soundworks in their own right, they become part of the physical structure in which they are played back. We have yet to understand the bases by which music experienced in such spaces retains its character as music (even bad music), or becomes reduced to an article of interior design, like,

as the Muzak Man said, "air conditioning" or, to borrow both Edward Cone's and Frank Zappa's term "musical wallpaper".

It would appear, then, that music's detachment from the concert hall has brought on other, local attachments.<sup>vi</sup> On the public end of the spectrum, shopping malls are an interesting case in point. Very often the same recorded "program" saturates each shop in the complex. This enforces a uniformity of space such that no matter what one happens to be shopping for, whether a goldfish or a microwave oven, the feeling is that one hasn't had to go very far in order to find it.<sup>vii</sup>

In the private sphere, one need only consider the increasing sophistication of home audio equipment. While a listener's control over order, volume, tone, and -- with the introduction of stereophonic recordings in the 50's -- balance, has never been deemed destructive of or intrusive to the composition, the appearance of digital sound processing modules in the home market begins to give the listener unprecedented control over what a composition will sound like on playback. Instrumentalists have traditionally been asked, to a greater or lesser extent, to be compositional "collaborators" (take the classical cadenza at one end, a graphic score by, say, Herbert Brün, at the other). One wonders then, as playback becomes more and more akin to performance, the point where compositions (/recordings) will emerge which encourage (and even require) the listener's participation, via any number of these

electronic devices, in "completing" the piece. The question is not if, but when, the listener of the recorded object will officially join the ranks of its performers.

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<sup>i</sup> A recording of a composition for live performer(s) and tape can itself pose additional problems. The loudspeaker, which is the source for one of the instruments (the tape recorder), becomes on the recording the source for all instruments, including itself -- a situation analagous to a "mirror in a mirror". Similarly, with today's midi controllers and sampling devices, recorded objects can be "performed" in concert. If the concert itself is recorded the resulting document will contain other objects of any class.

<sup>ii</sup> Anthony Haden-Guest, The Paradise Program, pp. 13, 15.

<sup>iii</sup> One of chess master Paul Morphy's most famous games was played in a box at the Paris Opera during a performance of The Barber of Seville.

<sup>iv</sup> Haden-Guest, op.cit. , p 20.

<sup>v</sup> Edward Cone, Musical Form and Musical Performance, p.12. Professor Cone's book was published in 1968. By the mid-70's, during the "disco" craze, many clubs did, in fact, have continuously running tapes, or disk jockeys, equipped with variable-speed turntables, who were skilled at being able to "segue" one record into the next without dropping a beat (or pitch).

Cone also refers to an ideal march music which would have a beginning but no end, the end arriving only when an order to stop had been issued.

<sup>vi</sup> Credit should go to theorist Scott Burnham for the precise phrasing of this idea.

<sup>vii</sup> Italian composer Walter Branchi, on visiting an American shopping mall for the first time, exclaimed, "Space stations! This is preparation for space stations!"