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The Unthinkable of Nothingness #3

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Abstract:

The Unthinkable of Nothingness is a performance proposal focused on the experience of listening following the principles of acousmatic as it was conceived by the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who proposed the abolition of his own visual appearance, using a veil while he was teaching to his students. He argued that by the implementation of this process, the concentration on the message would be much stronger and deeper. Following this principle, this third iteration of the piece seeks to promote the fruition of music content in a black box context, deprived of light.

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of the piece tries to emphasise the perception of absence in an individual, whatever associated with tangible circumstances or with more abstract domains of inner-perception. While referring to nothingness Sorensen explains:

> Parmenides maintained that it is self-defeating to say that something does not exist. The linguistic rendering of this insight is the problem of negative existentials: 'Atlantis does not exist' is about Atlantis. A statement can be about something only if that something exists. (Sorensen 2015)

As individuals, while we try to solve the equation of controlling what nothingness signifies to us, we tend to let our subjectivity occupy part of the vast territory of imprecision and imagination, and somehow, we override the possibility of a congruent rationalization. Incapable of control, we surrender to the experience of being incapable to comprehend.

> (...) what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. (...) he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up. (Pascal 1669)

2. TOWARDS ACOUSMATIC PROCEDURES

On this third version of the piece, we intend to propose the same production procedures as in previous presented versions, while we want to make an evaluation of the overall accomplishment of the conditions proposed for the performance. This search for the observance on acousmatic procedures appears as an iteration process towards the artistic evolution and realisation of the piece.

2.1. Listening without cause

> In 1955, during the early stages of *musique concrète*, the writer Jérôme Peignot used the adjective acousmatic to define a sound which is heard and whose source is hidden. (Dhomont 1995)

In an attempt to better understand the extension of the concept of acousmatic, we underline this fundamental idea clearly identified by Dhomont, and still very present these days: "we confuse the end with what was once the means: because throughout history, music has had only one way to exist — through performance — it has come to be identified with performance" (Dhomont 1995).

In the text *Defining timbre – Refining timbre,* Denis Smalley states that one of the great interests of electroacoustic music lies precisely in the "adventure of the game of connections"; a game that in its perspective is essentially an "activity of perceptions":

"Listeners may share source bondings when they listen to electroacoustic music, but they may equally have different, personalized bondings including those never intended or envisaged by the composer" (Smalley 1994).

Paradoxically, although they have all the means to compute in real time, the deepest ambitions, today's composers who choose electronics as a way to produce and create music, find themselves in the grip of the old problem of concrete music, identified and originally coined by the writer Jérôme Peignot. Thus, concrete music, originally behaving like a role model of a "black box" production inspired on the Pythagorean veil as way to keep causality away from judgments (Schaeffer 1966; Kane 2008; Kane 2014) finds its parallel in the production of electronic live music (specially with a laptop) since both models imply in their essence a disconnection from the logic of causality: "source and cause are unstable, illusory or non-existent". (Smalley 1994)

David Holland reports in his dissertation *An Empirical Investigation into Heightened Listening an Access Tool for Electroacoustic Music* a description from John Hull, who, for some time lost his visual perception and in consequence of this event, discovered a new dimension in the act of listening:

> John Hull, when speaking at the UKISC conference on Sound, Culture and Environments in 2001, talked about his experience after being blind for some time of waking up to the 'beauty of sound', noticing its details and sensing movement through it. After mourning the fact he would never see a tree again he rediscovered trees through sound, finding it 'infinitely fascinating' (Hull, 2001:11). John Hull has often been quoted within soundscape research (Copeland, 2000:23) as he explains how powerful the experience of sound can be and how this is heightened in the absence of the visual (Holland, 2011, p. 23).

Barry Truax stresses this ability to concentrate and focus on sound content when, in extreme cases of blindness, blind people can recognize changes in space conditions (open door / closed door) as well as the size of objects (large tree / tree) from only the sound reflection they derive from the environment that surrounds them (Truax 2001). It is therefore with some insistence that we underline the relevance attributed to this correlation of perceptions (absence of visual stimulation / focus on the sound stimulus) by some artists, explained in part in the reports of Holland and Truax.

Evoking Tim Hecker's concert at the LEV 2013 Festival in Gijon (Spain), Alicia Álvarez Vaquero highlights in an overall critical review of the festival, the importance of Hecker choosing to play in the dark without any visual complement, qualifying the sound experience as "more immersive". She also emphasizes that this immersion factor is reinforced by the "quality" of the sound, the "sound volume" and the acoustic qualities of the room (La Laboral theater).

> Tim Hecker was the first big name of the night, in charge of deploying its noise walls capable of sounding, at the same time, abrasive and delicate. Hecker decided to submerge the public in a total darkness, only interrupted by the illumination that he needed to work. Of course, this visual decision made the experience more immersive, especially considering the great asset of the festival, which is the impeccable sound of the theater of the Labor. Hecker's music has always had epic dimensions, but with the quality and volume we could enjoy it here became an overwhelming experience that allowed the audience to distinguish each of the details that make up the sound magma already present in albums like *Ravedeath, 1972*. At a time when most listeners listen to music through the tiny speakers of a computer or a Smartphone, Tim Hecker's show proves that to appreciate all the majesty of his work is essential to get a good sound system or, at least, good speakers. Certainly, after listening to him live it becomes difficult to think of listening to your discs again in Spotify through the computer, for example. (Vaquero 2013)

Considering the example of Francisco López (López & Gregory, 2003) and other artists who are using a black box model to present their works, we observe that there is no concession in the negotiation with the visual stimulus. This is barred from the first moment when the technical rider is presented to the event producers. In this way, artists circumscribe to the minimum the possibility of sensorial information from the production model, thus achieving sound immersive effects with a high level of proficiency. From the audition of these concerts, a sense of absence and inner journey derives from the space available to one's imagination. The place of the concert, in part, becomes a place of absence, a non-place, a point from which each viewer can travel in directions and directions, as opposed to what happens with the cinematographic art that leads us permanently to proposed sites from the outside; sites that are objective and identifiable from what we see and what we hear, do not really belong to us. As Worth says:

> It is in the absence of narrative elements that works are left more open–creating an experience rather than relating an experience. In the absence of content, context is more important, the material reality in which the work is situated. (Worth 2011)

2.2. Artists and Causality

Keiko Uenishi, questioned about the reason to start using a laptop in live performance, argued that the visual boredom was intended, once it could result in advantage to induce people to listen (Joaquim and Barbosa 2013).

Throughout the studies produced by the author while working on his doctoral thesis (Joaquim 2013), several artists (Helena Gough, Lawrence English, Frank Bretschneider, Kim Cascone, Simon Whetham, etc.) declared their interest and passion to play in conditions that point to the production of concerts in models identified as variations of the acousmatic philosophy.

2.3. Conclusion/Proposal

> If acousmatic listening is a practice, one should be able to talk about its meaning or the way that it conceptually articulates the audible world of those who employ it. (Kane 2014)

Establishing a metaphorical relation through the suppression of visual information derived from the sound production and from the space around, the obscurity, as an acousmatic tool, acts as a parallel of nothingness, allowing the listener to plunge into his own interiority, seeking for questions not answered and eventually unanswered answers.

Evan Parker, an English improviser and saxophonist with a career starting in 1966, makes some disruptive considerations regarding the musical performance. He says that it is possible to see a musician expressing a feeling and hear something that has no emotional correspondence with what is seen. In consequence, he stresses:

> It would be nice to be invisible (on stage). I would like to disappear, and just be the sound. I'm not terrible interested in the way playing looks. In fact, to me sometimes looks like a struggle and the consequent sound doesn't sound like a struggle at all. (...) (long silence) I'm not particularly interested in watching people play, I like to just listen to them play. I know other people feel differently. (Hopkins 2009)

Thus, the space of performance is proposed as an open space for listening and auto-analysis, while it can be a place for total abandonment and surrender to the unforeseen in each one of us. The emphasis is concentrated on immersion.

From the technical and operational point of view, the proposal is based on a sonic exploration of the performance space through the displacement of several micro-

phones to create a controlled process of acoustic feedback — the microphones are acoustically coupled with the loudspeakers. This result (acoustic feedback) plays a crucial role in the creation of a sound identity of the space and is than processed and combined in real time with other sound sources produced in the computer.

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