Letter to a twenty-five-year old electroacoustic composer

BARRY TRUAX

School of Communication and School for the Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6
E-mail: truax@sfu.ca

So, this field we call electroacoustic music is celebrating its first half century, just as I did recently. While I cannot say that I actually grew up with this music, I discovered it in my early twenties (1969), and so I have participated in a good twenty-five years of its development. I have also heard a lot about the previous twenty-five years, often from the practitioners themselves, many of whom have unfortunately passed away in the meantime. With any luck I may still have another twenty-five years, and then you will be in my place now, and I wonder what choices you will have made, and what you will be writing to the next generation?

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

It is perhaps a cautionary tale that I have to relate to you that someone such as myself, having worked in the field for only a little more than twenty-five years, starts being regarded as a 'pioneer' or 'senior artist' and is expected to comment sagely on the whirlwind of developments that have occurred over that period. Every five years seems to constitute a 'generation' and after five of those cycles one starts sounding like a colourful 'old-timer' spinning yarns that begin with 'I remember when'. The same thing may happen to you, only sooner since the speed of technological change seems to be accelerating.

The sheer pace of development, and everyone's inability to keep abreast of it, seems to produce a lack of perspective on either where we've been (except to regard it as inevitably primitive compared to where we are) or where we're going (except for an uneasy sense of it being, as Miranda might have put it, a 'brave new world' that has such machines in it!). A more positive result of this situation is that there is a strong sense of a thriving international community, if only because we need to cooperate and help each other deal with forces that are beyond our control. If you contribute to this community, it will give you a great deal of support in return.

Just what are the forces that have propelled our field so strongly? And why is the mood almost always 'up beat' – at least in comparison to our instrumental composing colleagues where the phrase 'squabbling over crumbs' usually comes to mind. Early on (and here comes the 'I remember when' part) I think the core of the energy was in the interdisciplinary confluence of art, technology and research. Our work was mainly in the labs, whether universities, research institutes, radio stations or industry, because this is where the machines were. Translating musical thinking into these environments was awkward and challenging, both because it revealed the woeful inadequacy of received musical theory, and because there was so much to learn about acoustics, psychoacoustics, audio engineering, computer programming, and so on. In order to work with computers, practically everyone had to become a programmer, or at least work with one, as there were no standard tools and few texts. The advent of the mini-computer, and then the micro-computer in the 1970s, brought that research and its tools into the realm of the individual and the music studio where personal models could be explored. In contrast, you are more likely to use the same software and hardware as most of your peers – how has that come about?

The principal difference in the field now to what it was then lies in the commercial applications of digital technology. Whether the market is niche or mass in scope, its force is inescapable as it generates most if not all of our tools today, with all of the sense of 'mixed blessing' that entails – near universal accessibility (undeniably a 'good thing') to the same tools (something I have more trouble with). Not only has the public become saturated with the products of the digital domain (from car alarms to the Internet), but so have the musicians (I have already encountered young composers of your age who are so comfortable in the digital domain they claim not to know how to use a tape recorder!). But for me, the digital domain means something totally open-ended, limited only by my ability to program compositional ideas – to you it already means configuring products that are industry standards. In fact, I have never really used anyone else's software for composition (which makes me a vanishing breed); you will probably never need to develop your own at all. Neither path seems preferable, but I wonder where the new ideas will come from for you?

In my own experience – which may or may not be instructive for you – the new ideas (and the music they lead to) are what have 'hooked me' on being an electroacoustic composer. When the use of any technology gives me new perceptual experiences and new compositional ideas, things that could not be achieved in any other way, then its use seems justified and the result

Organised Sound **4**(3): 147–150 © 1999 Cambridge University Press. Printed in the United Kingdom.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771800003034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

creative. In my own field, sound synthesis and composition, what constitutes new and old ideas is particularly clear. Preset timbres and sound effects – and the distancing effect they have on me – are the hallmarks of the marketplace's influence in terms of sound design, as is music based on instrumental concepts of harmony and orchestration in terms of composition. What I value most about my creative work are the pieces which could not even have been imagined by me beforehand, let alone realized, without the use of technology.

Some of the key influences that have led me in this direction are the interactive, quasi-improvisational aspect of the analogue studio, the open-endedness and precision of software development, particularly when combined with feedback from its musical use, and the aural experience of the complexity of the soundscape. All three of these areas currently seem to be on the margins of electroacoustic music as practised today. However, each area has stimulated my musical thinking, usually in ways that bypass words, intertwining sound and structure, aural perception and cognitive understanding, emotion and thought, in complex ways. I know you cannot turn back the clock, nor should you try, but I hope that these three areas – interactivity in the analogue tradition, open-endedness in software design, and the complexity of the acoustic world – will continue to inspire you as much as they have me.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Well, the quick answer is 'on our own', and maybe that's where we should be. We are not alone of course – I have already mentioned the supportive international community which has developed its own infrastructure. I think that the twentieth century in the arts has been unique in that its traditions have fragmented into separate, and largely parallel streams. For instance, after fifty years, it seems quite clear that the 'classical music' establishment has done practically nothing to embrace electroacoustic music as part of its ongoing development. There are occasional exceptions, but in general, the institutions of the symphony, opera and chamber music have ignored our art form. By the time you are my age, I expect you will find these groups still playing more or less the same repertoire as they do now, or at least music that sounds quite similar. As a result, you will probably feel excluded from their definition of culture.

The electroacoustic community is supported mainly by its own practitioners as a kind of 'parallel culture', the best result of which is that it is vibrant and open-ended, the less fortunate aspect being that it can be insular and not very self-critical. Being a member of this community, like any community, can be very comforting, but it can also lull you into the complacency of talking to (and composing for) only like-minded colleagues who accept what you do simply because it is like what they do, and not because you actually have anything important to say. Believe it or not, the technical and stylistic questions which provoke the most debate in our community, and fill the texts and research papers, have no importance for our audience (assuming we really hope to have any). You cannot expect them to be interested in what seems to them to be your esoteric concerns. Ask yourself, instead, if what you are doing answers any of *their* concerns or life issues. That may seem to be too much to expect, but in fact all of the great art of the past in every culture has done just that, and ultimately we cannot expect to be judged by any lesser standard.

An equally serious aspect of electroacoustic music today is that essentially it does not exist in terms of the mass media. Hence the public has no awareness of our work, unless they stumble across one of our practitioners or happen to like visiting fringe subcultures. Given that technology can be 'trendy', I have always been rather surprised by this lack of interest, but the root causes seem to be much deeper. The fact is that the mass media are dominated by commercial forces, and since no one is making enough money from this music, we are destined to be ignored. And because we lack the promotional apparatus of the 'culture industry' – publishers, agents, galleries, impresarios and producers – we are not going to get much 'arts' coverage either.

The most troubling aspect of this commercial force, at least for me, is the current contest for what is going to define culture. Is it the commercial model – culture as what sells – or the public one – culture as what has social value? One only has to look at the relative strengths of the private and public spheres in North America and Europe to see, first of all, different traditions in this definition, and secondly, the inexorable ascendancy of corporate control in the face of which government has dwindling influence. Computer music, in particular (a term that is likely to fade away as the distinction becomes less and less meaningful), will continue to be a site defined by this struggle because of its ambiguous position between industry and culture. The personal version of this dilemma – which 'god' will you serve? – may well be one of the most difficult choices you will have to make.

Most young composers seem to place their hope for technological development in the 'trickle down' effect – from the research lab to the manufacturers to the software developers to us – in order to get more and better tools (or 'toys', with its sexist overtones). This model has its practical benefits for which I am often grateful (laser printers, CD burners, DAT machines and the Internet certainly seem indispensable today), but I do not think it is the main route by which music as public culture will develop. For one thing, the rule will always be 'the more you have, the more they have', with 'they' being those in corporate control of both the production and dissemination of cultural products. In other words,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771800003034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

our increased access to technology provides a wonderful opportunity to be able to produce and distribute our own work, but have no illusion that originality, artistic validity, or access to an audience are made any easier than before.

So, you can see that I have no 'homestead' to pass on to you, just a niche carved between the borders of popular culture, artistic tradition and industry. We have links to all three of these areas and you will have to find your own way of balancing their competing forces and not becoming overwhelmed by their regimes. Please do not make the mistake of thinking of electroacoustic music as either 'high art' or 'fringe pop'. Those high and low culture, high-brow/low-brow distinctions have little relevance today and will probably have even less in the future. Electroacoustic music has grown out of the twentieth century 'tradition' of experimental art and is neither elitist nor populist. I suggest you worry less about where it fits socially, and concentrate more on what it means for you, which should be a means for personal creativity – something that seems increasingly elusive in a commodity-driven world. In fact, given the lack of cultural, media or commercial support you can expect if you follow the creative path, you will have to learn the hardest lessons of any art – your work has to be worth doing for its own sake, and you cannot imagine living without doing it.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

I doubt that anything I might predict about the future, as amusing as that exercise might be, would have any particular validity, or at least enough to merit your attention. Whatever we are presented with in the future, I know that I will tend to evaluate it in terms of what it contributes to my creative process and how it extends my musical thinking. On the broader social level, I will look at how it supports either the corporate or public definitions of culture, the latter being the only one that supports a broader range of 'voices' to emerge. I am personally in a privileged position at a public university to be able to devote myself exclusively to the pursuit of what I perceive to be the public good. You may not be so fortunate. However, I sense among people of your generation a willingness or at least an ability to live with less single-minded focus and to function in apparently contradictory situations with different value systems – what is commonly called 'postmodern' culture. Musically, you seem comfortable in actively pursuing, not just consuming, a pluralism of styles and media – world music one day, your 'garage band' the next, pop music on weekends, and maybe some electroacoustic music in your spare time – not to mention your 'day job'. That alone should add a new level of complexity to our already complicated sense of culture in the next century.

On the theoretical side, I have imagined some paradigm shifts (Truax 1992) which I think are long overdue, mostly characterised by a new definition of complexity and a greater degree of what is now being called 'ecological validity'. That means we should constantly test our results against the complexity of real-world situations, starting always with perception. For too long we have been satisfied with sounds that are pale imitations of those in the real world, and far too proud of our theories to admit what our ears should have told us: that the sounds and communication systems of the natural world – particularly the soundscape – are far more complex than what we are currently producing in our music. Too often reductionistic theories have convinced us that systems are linear, parameters are independently controllable, and human responses predictable. Fortunately, such theories are coming under greater critical scrutiny as they increasingly prove themselves to be inadequate to explain phenomena in the real world. But in your own life, try to listen as openly and attentively to the soundscape as you do to the music you are imposing on it. Find a balance between listening and sound-making, and be prepared to be humble.

I still maintain that theory should follow practice, and that each should be informed by the other. But even if we manage to develop better intellectual models in order to understand the world and our place within it, artistic practice should continue to go beyond even the best models and have an aura of the inexplicable and the evanescent. So, avoid the latest 'bandwagon', become informed to the best of your ability, but be prepared to go the final steps on your own with only your own intuition as a guide – most of the time, you will eventually be proved right! But if you are not, try to have the maturity to learn from your mistakes.

So, in the end, what it all comes down to is not the brave new world of the machine that promises to make everything possible, or the various environmental or economic crises that will make life difficult for you, but simply finding something inside yourself that is necessary. This is very old, and not very original advice, but we have such interesting ways of rediscovering its truth today! How ironic that something external like technology and software might eventually teach us something about ourselves! Do not be misled by the merely rational aspect of technology to think that electroacoustic music is just an esoteric mind game for producing abstract music. If you follow that path, you will end up sounding like everyone else. Do not be afraid to follow your own passions, your sexuality, your imagination and your spirituality and express them through your music. That will make your music worth listening to, and if you do all that, I will be very curious to hear what you will have to say after twenty-five years in the field!

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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1998 meeting of the Academy of Electroacoustic Music, Bourges, France.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771800003034 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771800003034 Published online by Cambridge University Press