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**Consonances, Community, and Reflexivity:
remarks on the relationship of music and the (sound) arts**

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Abstract

Music is a faith-based community. It is a portable home, which is why so many people these days carry it around in headphones. Music helps put things into order. It strives to frame the social situation it evolves in and knows no outside position. Music (with all its links to dance, language, rites, and shopping centres) leads listeners into the moment, because it is there that – in blissful unawareness – eternity takes place.

Musical composition that claims high intellectual standards finds itself in a strange place: reflection on music seems to remain impossible inside the musicking community.

It is my conviction that musical composition cannot sensibly limit itself to the production of work composed in the defined formats of established standards. Rather it should be understood and practiced as a truly open-ended process. For this to happen it is necessary that music invites itself onto a bigger playing field, spanning music and the (in)audible, allowing for new situations and potentially creating novel positions for everyone and everything involved: composers as well as listeners.

Consonances, Community, and Reflexivity: remarks on the relationship of music and the (sound) arts

For my provocation to start this second session of the colloquium I would like to outline my conviction that music is a faith-based community, and articulate the need for artistic practice in music and sound to remain an open-ended process.

I contend that all attempts to normatively define specific art forms have proven to be futile, utterly impossible and – above all – more obstructive than helpful to artists. The artists themselves have no need to define their object of investigation or their methods of production as a pre-requisite of their practice. The lack of definition cannot be seen as art's deficiency when compared to science or other forms of rigorous research; instead it is its central advantage, because it is specifically this lack of stringent method that allows and requires the search for new ways to create, as well as to perceive. This is why I am not worried if a specific or all of my projects are classified as sound art or music.

Still, as an artist coming from the field of musical composition I have always been intrigued by the relationship between music and its contexts: those that represent established musical standards and expectations, and those that reflect its audible consonances outside of what is traditionally understood as the musical domain. This wider interest in contextual positioning of one's own music-making relates not only to the sounding aspects of music, its sonic material, but also to related practices, traditions, rites, and movements of performing and perceiving, as well as to the ways music shapes our lives, and conversely, how our lives, bodies, and pre-conceptions shape our musical practice.

When shifting one's focus away from the scores and mixing consoles to look into this extended context of musical practice, it becomes obvious that even the 'purest' forms of music are not about structural relations of frequencies in time, but are bodily affairs, linked to all and everything. If we consider the score in isolation there is simply no way to investigate, to give just one example, the fundamentally puzzling, even confounding relationship between the symbol printed on paper and the actual, individual, sound-producing act of the performing musician. In the context of musical conventions and expectations, putting down the first note of an orchestral score means implicitly agreeing to uncountable rules, regulations, and concepts on how to structure the specific work in question. By extension these rules and regulations also determine how to understand and maintain the structures and concepts of a concurrent society, while there are very limited ways to react to these social structures within the score. This relationship between aesthetic practice and social reality means that composing in an extended field, beyond the hermeneutics of a musical context, not only opens up the doors of dedicated venues to new sound worlds, but goes beyond the sonic, to lead to questions on perceiving, moving, and

communing within the everyday: it introduces the social dimension of what music is and in doing so connects music – from a fundamentally sonic ‘perspective’ – to all aspects of the audible and, ultimately, the inaudible, that which is not heard in itself, but is linked to the heard by various forms of cultural construct.

Even though my aim is not the neat delineating of music from other forms of art, but rather its opposite – the understanding of music as integrated implicitly into social mores and habits – I still believe that there exists something we could call ‘music proper’. This music proper differentiates itself from sound as sound and it is not fully described by the terms ‘organised sound’ either. Language, to give one example that illustrates my issue with the term ‘organised sound’, is organised sound too; it is not music however, and sound as sound is not music because it lacks the aspect of intended human communication.

To be more specific about the term music I contend that music always evolves as a faith-based community. It creates portable homes, often now carried in headphones. Music helps put things into order and strives to frame the social situation in which it evolves. Making as well as listening to music implies participation in a group activity, and knows no outside position. Participation in these groups today does not require physical presence but can – and more often than not does – take mediated forms. Music is a signpost to the moment where – in communion with others – eternity takes place.

Music allows you to frame how you experience the world. It holds the potential to function as horizon, sealing your world from that of others, or from the terror of the void. Taking along your musical community on headphones helps keep things in proper order, allowing the new to take its place among well-established grids. Music, on headphones or not, dominates the listeners’ appreciations of their surroundings, it rules the environment the listeners are situated in or walk through. It does so not only by filling its physical environment with sound, which of course any sound does. Rather, it is a constant, unsolicited and hence intrusive invitation to join in.

I contend that in dominating its social environment, music increases group cohesion. In the age of mediated presence this group is – of course – not necessarily the group you are in or physically closest to; headphones allow for a ‘remote log-in’ to your community of choice. I also suggest that music provides means of ruling the future: this is the role of the drummer, the function of rhythm and the might of the steady pulse. The more often events in the present play out in ways rather similar to the recent past, the more stable the world becomes, confidence increases and predictions about the near future become more feasible. Communal faith in the stability of the world increases and with it the security and freedom perceived. Structuring time in musical ways helps synchronise people into one train of events, creating a shared chronology, which in turn has direct effects on the concerted experience of causality, its close cousin.

Establishing one line of chronology makes the world a more consequential place. One thing happens after the other, and if this repeats often and regularly enough one event will cause another, introducing necessity where in the beginning there only was incidental succession of individual events. In this way music is instrumental in raising the perceived level of security. It allows you to safely join in and take part in society, free of all imminent threats.

Music's might to entrain groups and build a communal faith has shaped theory as well as compositional practice of the European post-war avant-garde in rather specific ways. Many of the implicit rules stemming from this discourse still resonate in the composition departments throughout continental Europe. In Austria and Germany, after the catastrophe of the Nazi period, music with its rumoured powers to synchronise listeners into will-less masses was treated with suspicion. Forms of music with a steady beat and the marching of armies were seen and heard in close alignment. Conscientious composers would not be content with luring their audiences into blissful ignorance and thoughtless communality with the help of harmonies and rhythms. Instead composers tried to introduce reflexive breaks into their musical works, to start an informed discourse with their audience rather than simply showering them with sentiment. The new ideal became an analytical, a structural listener, who behaved in a reflective manner toward the musical composition presented; and the musical works presented did not allow simple consumption through indulgence in a synchronous communal existence. In certain ways the musical avant-garde can be interpreted as an attempt to transcend music in and through music.

The compositional approaches of the avant-garde, aimed at keeping group entrainment at bay, might have succeeded for specific works and concert situations. However, it is safe to say that they have not led to a fundamental change of what music is and how music works in most if not all parts of society: music still has a beat, a melody, and a harmony, and these characteristics are still shaped by their cultural contexts. Music is something you grow up into, it is bigger than you and will always shape you more than you will shape it. Deconstructing the musical community means putting a halt to this cultural predetermination: calling into question the faith in the musical moment while defying it at the same time.

My suspicion is that music proper has rather limited means of incorporating reflection and therefore subversion. Whatever one does as a composer attempting to negotiate difference (in styles, sounds, or behaviours) the resulting music, if successful, tends to fully incorporate its other, regardless of any vocal calls to walk this or that way. Music puts things into order and provides ways of stabilising the world in terms of temporal evolution and social interaction. Musical life evolves along well-defined grids, and – notwithstanding ecstasy and freedom perceived – stays within expectable, reliable boundaries. Music is a social machine that at least apparently increases world security, stability, and confidence.

Much of musical practice that understands itself in the traditions of the European avant-garde or art music today still appears ill at ease to simply celebrate the communion of musicking¹. At the same time it focuses its attention on structures having frequency and time relations within the defined 'musical'. I believe there is little use in fighting music's core strength: the ability to produce communion through musicking, creating a sonic sociality in music, and contend that it will always remain possible to take part in and reflect on it at once. However, music does allow for changes in positions for composer and audience alike, and makes visible or audible specific ways of mediatisation which can bring different aspects of society and the political into view and point one's ears in new, previously unheard directions².

I also contend that musical composition does not need to constrain itself to the production of more works for the canons of music history, just as the reflection on and teaching of music should not be limited to the communication of recipes for how to score, produce, filter, and progress harmonically or atonally. Musical composition, practiced as an open-ended, artistic investigation, will open new vistas onto music and, in doing so, will shed new light on music's relationship to the (in)audible. Because of this it might as well and as validly lead to inaudible results, such as performative acts, objects, interventions, or specific acts of listening. And it is here that musical composition and sound art practice meet, overlap, and develop enormous potential to inform each other.

I am not proposing that it is sound art's only role to busy itself with the deconstruction of music. Even less do I want to propose a specific trajectory of progress from music into a positioning of the musical experience in sound art, and neither do I want to suggest that sound art will necessarily always be touching on the musical. Rather, at the end of my provocation I would like to suggest that extending the notion of musical composition from the fabrication of new musical pieces to a potentially unbound, aurally motivated exploration of human existence and sociality means there is no need for a clear delineation between music and sound art or, indeed, between the sonic and the (in)audible. Musical composition can and I believe should be practiced as an open-ended endeavour in a field extending over all forms of the (in)audible. This I believe provides a more promising context to compositional work than one clearly delineated as 'musical' ever could, even if it provides less of a home.

¹ The term 'musicking' refers to Chris Small's book of the same name in which he makes the case that music should not be considered as thing but as an activity. Small, C. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Wesleyan University Press.

² It is important to keep in mind that in this context 'new' never means making the 'old' obsolete, just like a newly discovered vista of a mountain peak does not render all others outdated.