

"Beat"

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Sonic Ideas/Ideas Sonicas"

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The task of a musician is to create work that reflects a person or group's unique vision. Making music in a commodity-driven society means doing so in the face of an expectation that music fit into narrow boxes defined by genre, style, period, media, and aesthetics. In academia, "classical" music departments and conferences want to hear "classical" music; jazz clubs owners generally want to hear music that uses acoustical instruments and reflects an idiom from the early 1960s. Electroacoustic music developed its own rigid rules regarding conventional musical elements such as beat and melody. This makes some sense since EM arose as an extension of the late 19th and early 20th century responses to European "standard practice." During that period, as the hierarchical nature of European thought and society weakened, so did relations governing musical structure. Melody and rhythm, each previously interlocked with harmony, began to become independent features. The new music needed new organizational rules, and thus arose serialism and a studied avoidance of the currency of Romanticism, melody, harmony, and a beat that integrated the two.

Personally, I was raised in New York City, largely within the aesthetically narrow environment of the Julliard School of Music. I sometimes speak of that experience as a training camp to rehabilitate my early childhood free improvisational instincts. Fortunately, these returned at a later date. But during those seven or so years, I knew little beyond European standard practice and learned to look down upon what was viewed there as less sophisticated. Thus music that didn't reflect a formalist sensibility, was beat driven, and expressive beyond narrowly construed, culturally demarcated limits wasn't really music. When I first heard Jimi Hendrix in the ninth grade, I was in total shock at the discovery of emotionally compelling music that operated on entirely different premises. There was no turning back.

After a brief, but fun period playing rock music, I discovered free jazz, Karlheinz Stockhausen's electronic and intuitive music, John Cage's aleatoric works, and Frank Zappa's mix of widely ranging collective improvisation and musical theater. In college, first at the Crane School of Music in upstate New York, I joined a live electronic music ensemble directed by the wonderful (and sadly late) Don Funes. Don's aesthetic sensibilities were utterly eclectic and unbounded: free jazz meets abstract electronic sounds meets a rock beat meets raga alap. This mix seemed right to me.

My first studio work was in the Schaefferian tradition of musique concrete, complete with splicing reel to reel tapes and non-referentiality. But then a Buchla system arrived and with it, the playful, multi-layered, beat and pitch sequenced musical world of Mort Subotnick, and it was the most fun and expressive thing I had ever seen. We were listening heavily to Herbie Hancock's free-jazz meets funk inflected Mwandishi band and then the more intently beat driven Headhunters came out. I began attending loft concerts in downtown New York City and directly experienced the "creative music" of black experimentalists like Anthony Braxton and Leroy Jenkins. All of this entered the mix of my musical thinking and that of my peers. My own music erred on the side of abstraction and less oriented to a beat than some, but I thought of this as more a reflection of my personality at the time than of any formal aesthetic constraints. There simply were none in the world I inhabited.

The music of Morton Subotnick and of Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi band was of particular interest because it so blurred conventional boundaries. Hancock's work was an amalgam of different kinds of beat structures, drawing upon free jazz, funk, R&B, and more. Hancock's electric piano seemed to float in various layers of abstraction, while at the same time moving directionally. The notion of funk coexisting with abstraction, and electronics with harmonically beautiful horn arrangements, was startling. Subotnick's music, particularly *Silver Apples of the Moon*, *Sidewinder*, and *Touch*, suggested that there was no reason why electronic music couldn't be fun, accessible, and foot tapping, while also drawing upon received traditions of abstraction. Simplicity and complexity coexisted comfortably, and there was an inherent physicality about the music. I believe that this reflected the composer's idea that gesture was multidimensional, bridging sonic experience with physical shape, effort, and movement.

During the past two years I have been exploring, in my writing and music making, meeting places between jazz and "creative" musicians, and electronic music, particularly relating to the late 1960s and 1970s. What I've discovered is a wealth of exciting music that defies categorization, but also some sobering understandings of what I've come to understand as cultural and racial segregation. As I now consider it, the objection to beat and melody found within electroacoustic music is one part historical – after all, who wants to go back to that which a hundred years of musical development sought to escape – another part a desire to free this movement from commercial trends – a third strictly aesthetic preference – but the story doesn't end there. European "classical" music was fundamentally about creating an internal experience for the listener – thus the rule that a concert attendee must never make a sound, especially not a cough, yawn, or foot tapping. The results can be a gloriously rich and emotional, immersive experience.

The "no cough" rule, however, isn't exclusively about removing noisy distractions. It is paired with the lack of attention given to physicality of the performers. Western flute sounds avoid white noise at their initiation (in contrast to Japanese *shakuhachi* playing, which is very much about a blend and movement between white noise and pitched sound) to attain an ethereal sound profile. With the exception of some conductors and performers identified as eccentric, performance motions are limited to that which is specific to sound production and the very stylized hand and arm movements, such as the floating arms of a pianist. This is all in keeping with a musical world that minimizes the body. It is rare that a steady, insistent beat at the musical core can coexist with a disembodied perspective. Just try not even tapping your toes to your favorite beat driven music!

At the risk of essentialism, some have pointed out that historically African-based musical traditions are more embodied than those of European origin. In his famous 1983 article "Black Music as an Art Form," educator and composer of Art (and tape) music Ollie Wilson offered a culturally-based definition of Black Music, which he terms fundamentally rhythmic, featuring "rhythmic clash or disagreement of accents ... cross-rhythm and metrical ambiguity ... singing or the playing of any instrument in a percussive manner" and featuring "a tendency to incorporate physical body motion as an integral part of the music making process." Wilson includes additional elements, as well, relating to musical density and contrast. There have been several historical moments in the United States when these elements have been embedded within the rhetoric used to attack music most heavily associated with black Americans. As Trevor Wishart observed in his book "On Sonic Art": "In the extreme case, the combination of pitch, rhythm and timbre inflection in jazz and rock music is seen as lascivious, sexually suggestive and ultimately a threat to social order."

Surely, there is music by black musicians that reflect sensibilities different than those identified by Ollie Wilson. But Wilson's definition places the European-based sensibilities of much electroacoustic music in a broader cultural perspective, wherein the norm tends towards the European. Composer and historian George Lewis has pointed to the racially segregated manner by which historians and theorists in the United States have categorized music. Lewis, in his 1996 article "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives" (*Black Music Research Journal* 16:1) notes that the term "experimental" has been generally reserved for white musicians. Saxophonist and composer Anthony Braxton and George Lewis have both observed that John Cage's "indeterminate" approach to non-through composed works can be contrasted with a more historically black-oriented musical aesthetic associated with the term "improvisation," referentiality, call and response, and development of a unique personal sound.

The question I raise is whether these two musical perspectives can coexist in the same work (my answer is "of course they can"). Is it possible to tear down the wall between electroacoustic music, as defined from its historically Eurological perspective, and elements at the core of black music, such as a beat? I find historical antecedents in the music of Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi band, the Henry Cowell-influenced rock and jazz compositions and arrangements of Charles Stepney's Rotary Connection, Sun Ra, Don Cherry, and a wide array of musicians associated with the Chicago and New York-based Association For The Advancement of Creative Music. Among them are Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, George Lewis, Wadada Leo Smith, and Roscoe Mitchell. Among white electronic music collaborators are featured Richard Teitelbaum, Gordon Mumma, Alvin Curran, and Patrick Gleeson.

My own music making in recent years has attempted to build upon what I've learned from this history, from the perspective of my own very personally constructed musical world. Thinking back upon what I've been doing in my solo work for piano and electronics, my piano, bass, and drums and electronics trio, and a newer, more electronic trio, there are a few provisos that come to mind.

One can draw upon a beat while not making it the core glue around which a work is organized. Left to their own devices, my students too often generate a beat and then treat other sound elements as material to fit within or over it, leaving other musical aspects and formal possibilities out in the cold. This is a loss. The richness of what electroacoustic music offers can be lost as a result. This is its sound-based nature, in which shifting and unfolding timbre can come to the fore. It is my preference that audiences not lose sight (or, rather, hearing) of this rich diversity of musical attributes. One thing that I love about drumming that emerged from free jazz is that percussion can be both textural and rhythmic, sometimes at the same time, but sometimes it can be one or the other.

One can create works that include a beat, in which rhythmic elements float in and float out of a musical texture. They needn't remain steady or out front. In this sense, they become something akin to extended sound objects or, from a Stockhausen perspective, moment form, in which things happen and then pass. This, too, is a lesson I learned from free jazz, that rhythm can be treated dynamically rather than statically.

I am of a generation that came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I was not raised on electronica and, at the risk of over-generalizing, my personal aesthetic differs from it. I share the concern of some of my colleagues who fear that the field could be overwhelmed by trends from more commercial music. I certainly find that my students' musical horizons are limited

rather than expanded by what they are mostly exposed to. I understand my role as an educator to be about expanding their sense of possibilities and not mimicking what they've grown up listening to. Also, I don't think that the over-predictability of some more popular electronic music is a helpful trend for electroacoustic composers. For instance, coming out of my experiences playing in the jazz world, I personally prefer a flexible, rather than a locked beat. As I noted earlier, my view is that an overly fixed beat directs the listener's attention away from other sonic elements and this shifts the balance in a manner. Still, the key concept should be nuance: nothing to an extreme, while keeping all sonic possibilities and subtleties open.

Many would suggest that the tendency of electroacoustic music to avoid a beat leaves it on the sidelines. Indeed participants at the major conferences and festivals in that field tend towards being academics, and this is a small audience. Sometimes I feel that the sonic possibilities of the field have been exhausted and largely absorbed by film sound track composing. But a separation from more popular musical trends has its virtues, keeping the dictates of commerce out of the equation when composers are imaging new works. Avoidance of a beat has allowed composers to exclusively explore many otherwise ignored musical domains in what has been an essentially sound-based art. Yet, this tendency has also failed to attract composers beyond a European sensibility and, in particular, people of color. Studious avoidance of a beat isn't only an aesthetic choice. It also represents a particular cultural point of view, one that welcomes some and excludes others. Maybe this tendency to define a field by what it isn't as much as what it is has run its course.

My own experience as musician and historian points to a wide spectrum of possibilities that allow me to welcome rhythmic elements within my admittedly hybrid electroacoustic music. Why not offer the composer and performer the widest palate and open the widely to welcome fellow musicians who may in fact be natural colleagues? Finally, the most exciting trends I find in electroacoustic music are about interactivity. Interactive elements can expand the potential of existing instruments and open new possibilities for expression. But there is no reason why these new technologies need to be the exclusive province of a single aesthetic perspective. The commercial trend is towards marketing new musical toys with very limited interactivity. The world would be a more creative place if wisdom gained within electroacoustic music was more widely shared.