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THE UNTHINKABLE OF NOTHINGNESS

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Abstract

The Unthinkable of Nothingness is a performance proposal focused on the possible experiences 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, the piece seeks for promote this practise applied to the fruition of music content in a black box context, deprived of light.

Keywords

Acousmatic
Performance
Deep Listening
Abstract Music
Aural Concentration
Immersion
Flow
Existentialism

1. INTRODUCTION

In general terms, the title of the piece tries to emphasise the perception or feeling of absence in an individual, whatever associated with tangible circumstances (absence of light, for example, as a phenomenon of physics) or with more abstract domains of inner-perception. While referring to nothingness we tend to fall in paradox: on one side, we think we know what we are talking about and on the other side we experience a process of absence of control on the delimitation of the concept in itself. As 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 find some sort of comfort only when we let our subjectivity occupy part of the vast territory of imprecision, and somehow, we override the possibility of a congruent rationalization. Nevertheless, incapable of control, we give up and 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. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret; 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

2.1. Black Box: The Absence of Place

Considering the conceptual and technical characteristics of a black box space as a model for public presentation, Francisco López is probably one of the most paradigmatic cases on this type of option.

A fervent supporter of absolute concentration in the process of listening, López imposes on his public a relation disconnected from any explanation or relationship with the world of causes and "meanings" (irrespective of their origin). In order to operate this relation, the author demands the production of darkness in the performance space and distributes to each listener a black cover to blind the eyes, creating a double reinforcement in the production of disconnection with any visual stimulus that may occur in the space during the performance.

Gregory Gangemif characterizes Lopez's intentionality and his artistic statement as the result of a long conceptual and aesthetic evolution: "is a deep process of refinement towards an extreme musical purism, with a voluntary and forceful refusal of any visual, procedural, relational, semantic, functional or virtuoso elements". (López & Gregory, 2003) As Lopez explains in an interview conducted by Gregory, in *Francisco López — Belle Confusion*:

> I'm basically interested in a profound listening, in a listening experience that goes way beyond what is normal in music, I would say. And I tend to get immersed myself into what I consider to be a very profound, deeply touching, deeply transforming experience of listening. This is the way I listen to a lot of stuff and the way that for me is the most intense and the most important. So I try to give this, to promote this in my work. (López & Gregory, 2003)

By this way, Lopez revisits and embraces the causes of acousmatic, bringing back to the center of the discussion the old problematic of causality and modal complementarities or cancellation (sound / image). Other parallel cases can be found in the live works of @c, Kim Cascone, Tim Hecker, Peter Rehberg (Pita), Mark Fell, Helena Cough and Simon Whetham.

2.2. Causality (and the lack of) in acousmatic

In an attempt to better understand the extension of the concept of acousmatic, we underline this fundamental idea clearly identified by Dhomont in 1995, 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)

Advancing some tens of years in relation to the appearance of acousmatic in French music, we come to the present day with a new possibility: being able to produce and create in real time, from a simple laptop, what 60 years ago it was virtually impossible to do in real time, whatever the medium.

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:

> 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)

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)

Helena Gough, an electronic musician which has a great experience as violin player, underlining the acousmatic condition, noted that "focusing on only one sense can be an intense and rich experience, and that when you close your eyes, you 'see' with the mind and the imagination". (Joaquim and Barbosa 2013)

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)

> I'm with Evan Parker, I'm not interested in watching people play, I just want to listen.
> —Frank Bretschneider (Joaquim 2013)

> I believe it's the physicality of sound that makes live performance unique and commanding to audiences. Listening can be achieved in the home or on headphones, but listening with you whole body requires something more substantive like a sound system.
> —Laurence English (Joaquim 2013)

> I have shifted to a more acousmatic approach to diffusing my work and now sit in the audience in total darkness save for the glow of my laptop screen. (...) If listening is the goal for a laptop musician then I'd suggest shifting to an acousmatic mode of presentation.
> —Kim Cascone (Joaquim 2013)

> [I] tried different methods in which to 'disappear' when performing—be-cau-se I want people to focus on the sound. I have tried darkened rooms, playing from behind the audience, and even considered the blindfold...
> —Simon Whetham (Joaquim 2013)

2.3. Conclusion / Proposal

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, at the same time that 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 displace-

ment of several microphones in order 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 in itself, and is than processed and combined in real time with other sound sources produced in the computer.

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