

Alternative Music Culture in Toronto: Challenging Conventional Music Appreciation and Understanding

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Abstract

Since modern art tends to be enigmatic and elusive at best, the public feels discouraged to seek out new artistic paradigms. Many new and alternative music genres, therefore, have failed to challenge conventional music paradigms, ultimately failing to infiltrate public school music curricula. In Toronto's music scene, however, there have been several musical genres which have advanced the limits of conventional musical boundaries, particularly *New Music* and *Acoustic Ecology*, respectively represented by compositions such as "Made in China," by Toca Loca, and "Streetcar Harmonics," by Andra McCarthy. *New Music* is concerned with providing new listening tools to appreciate altered musical boundaries, whereas *Acoustic Ecology* focuses upon appreciating sounds in relationship to life and society. Ultimately both genres separately advocate cultures which strive to present an alternative way of listening to sound (be it music or soundscape), as well as challenging conventional musical paradigms, reinventing the notion of contemporary music, and questioning the boundaries of what 'music' really is, which has huge implications for music education.

Keywords: New Music; Acoustic Ecology; alternative music; music education

Introduction

Throughout music history, conventional genres such as classical, pop, and rock have been praised by society, and consequently reproduced as carbon copies of yesterday's masterful innovations. As a result, this invariable streamlining of mainstream music has dominated the musical landscape of large metropolises, ultimately creating a barrier which strongly advises against the success and viability of newer music. Since modern art tends to be elusive and enigmatic at best, the public feels discouraged to seek out new paradigms (Oh, 2007). Hence, many new and alternative music genres have failed to subvert conventional music paradigms. Since curriculum reflects society (Alsubaie, 2016), new and alternative music genres have failed to imbue public school music curricula.

In Toronto's music scene, however, there have been several musical genres which have successfully created an agency for their unique musical approach, particularly *New Music* and *Acoustic Ecology*, respectively represented by compositions such as "Made in China," by Toca Loca (2008), and "Streetcar Harmonics," by Andra McCarthy (2012). Specifically, *New Music* is concerned with providing new listening tools to appreciate altered musical boundaries, and societal notions of "the contemporary." *Acoustic Ecology*, on the other hand, focuses upon appreciating sounds in relationship to life and society and whether or not specific sounds truly constitute music or white noise. However, while it is apparent that society confuses yesterday's musical innovations as beautiful instead of nostalgic (Oh, 2007), *New Music* and *Acoustic Ecology* both separately advocate cultures which strive to present an alternative way of listening to sound, be it music or soundscape. Therefore, despite *New Music* and *Acoustic Ecology* promoting antithetically opposing social purposes and cultures, both genres provide a new way of decoding the elusivity of modern art through challenging conventional music paradigms,

renovating the notion of contemporary music, and questioning the boundaries of what music really is, which has huge implication for music education. However, before analyzing how this is achieved, it is salient to grasp a broader insight into the intrinsic qualities of both genres.

Intrinsic Qualities of *New Music* and *Acoustic Ecology*

New Music (commonly referred to as *Contemporary Music*), had its inception in Toronto in the 1970s, and soon underwent attentive supervision by the Music Gallery: Toronto's Centre for Creative Music (Van Eyk, 2006). From its historical roots, however, *New Music* acted as a branching off point from the Classical genre, as a practice to create compositions for orchestral performance (Van Eyk, 2006). While beginning as an extension of the Classical era, the *New Music* of today typically does not call for traditional orchestral ensembles, nor does it draw exclusively from the classical vein (Van Eyk, 2006). Furthermore, this emerging contemporary innovation has redefined the categorical boundaries of music through finding its inspiration within several tri-structured subgenres such as *Rhythm and Blues*, *Jazz*, and other unique categories such as *Noise and Silence* (Van Eyk, 2006). While there is no universally recognized genre of *New Music*, several instances of hyper minimalism, post romantic neo-tonalism, freak out improvisation, and drone electro have been documented and explored throughout the *New Music* scene (Van Eyk 2006). Unfortunately, despite the Music Gallery's efforts, and *New Music*'s broad categorical development within Toronto's music scene, the culture ultimately lacks the recognition, visibility, and funding necessary to remain a functional practice (Van Eyk 2006). While typically this music could be found and played within Toronto's Massey Hall within the contexts of a grand nationalistic music festival, several economic obstacles, financial deficits, and harsh waves of gentrification have all contributed to a largely invisible status except for intimate communal spaces such as church basements and small theatres within Toronto (Van

Eyk 2006). Despite this underground nature, Toronto artists such as Toca Loca, Tapestry New Opera, and New Adventures in Sound have managed to keep the culture above water. According to Gregory Oh (2007), vocalist of Toca Loca, *New Music* offers a unique and captivating interpretation of modern art by being an integral part of a living creation. Moreover, it ultimately encapsulates ephemeral instances which cannot be revisited or preserved (Oh 2007), and is performed as a reflection of society unto itself as a method of creating a sense of identity, indicating what it's like to exist at this time in history (Oh 2007). It is for this reason that *New Music* does not target typical opera and symphony subscribers, but rather, attracting innovative music enthusiasts, and audiences inspired to experience new music because it communicates what is meaningful to them (Van Eyk 2006).

Conversely, *Acoustic Ecology*, or what could be referred to as *Soundscapism*, originates within the late 1960s, with Murray Schafer, the guru of *Acoustic Ecology* (King et al, 2011). From the birth of *Soundscapism*, Schafer (1970) created the *World Soundscape Project* as an effort to elicit attention to the rapidly changing sonic environment of society through the lens of noise pollution (Schafer, 1970). Moreover, through Schafer's research and analysis of specific environmental soundscapes and spaces, he sought to further understand the difference between sounds, which are intrinsically natural, and arguably calming, compared to noises, which are annoyingly undesired, and harmful (Schafer, 1998). Schafer highlights the difference between sounds and noises as transmitted soundwaves which facilitate separate reactions. Sounds entice mental and spiritual recomposure, and the regeneration of the metaphysical metabolism. Noise, however, creates a ceaselessly macrocosmic symphony of socially chaotic bombardment, which physically and mentally threatens the health of human beings in the form of noise pollution (Schafer, 1998). Examples of sound compared to noise include natural occurrences, such as the

chirping of birds, rustling of leaves, and the human voice (Braga, 2020), versus intrusive noises such as construction, highway traffic, and loud (undesired) music. Through categorizing sound within positive and negative parameters, Schafer (1998) depicted certain spaces as either Humane or Inhumane sound environments. These environments either promote one's health, or greatly increase the chances of developing chronic disabilities, which are damaging to cardiovascular, cognitive, and mental health (Braga, 2020). Moreover, Schafer (1998) believes that we are living in a time of sound overkill, which he describes as problematic. Hence, he argues that noise pollution threatens to relegate the quality of our humane environments to a substandard, and unnatural form. With the increase of intrusively loud technological advancements and inhumane spaces, particularly in Toronto, Schafer (1998) has encouraged audiences who are willing to retreat from the sonic noise of the cities, to listen with an attentive and critical ear, to the environments they dwell within. Furthermore, through critically analyzing environments, citizens have utilized natural, and pleasant sounds as a pain remedy—a distraction of sorts for the senses from the real facts of existence, which can ultimately be described as *Audioanalgesia* (Schafer 1998). In terms of *Soundscapism*, and *Audioanalgesia*, these practices, while not invisible, fail to exert a large agency within society. This is a consequence of how extinct Humane spaces are because of the constant assault of noise that modern society is subjected to. However, as each person's noise threshold and opinion of sound versus noise differs, it is theoretically possible to engage in *Audioanalgesia* within any space. This is possible if one finds him/herself within an adequate space where aberrant noises transition into delightful sounds.

With regards to those who play *Audioanalgesia* or environmental soundscapes, few groups who engage within this practice exist, as it is an individualistic experience. However,

compositions written for Schafer's (1970) *World Soundscape Project*, and "found sound" enthusiasts such as McCarthy, do perform works which incorporate the use of soundscapes as the main event, or as the framework for nature inspired performances (King et al. 2011).

Given the contexts which form the frameworks for both Toca Loca's "Made in China" and McCarthy's "Streetcar Harmonics" it will be possible to properly dissect their elements as consequences of opposing purposes and cultures. To analyze some of the musical elements in both pieces (rhythm, texture, and structure), it is also imperative to understand these elements as subversive challenges of the conventional music paradigm, renovations of the notion of contemporary, and critiques of what truly qualifies as music.

The Musical Element of Rhythm

Rhythm can be described as a composition's ordering flow of sounds created in relation to the composition's structured temporality, or the beat and tempo (Shelemay, 2006). With this in mind, Toca Loca's "Made in China: is extraordinary, as it paradoxically utilizes rhythm through ultimately abandoning a uniform beat. While the piece appears as a cynical amalgamation of sounds, the use of rhythm, tempo, beats, measure, and meter are not only indistinguishable, but they are also completely abandoned. Since the piece follows a loose recurrence of small, syncopated motifs, it is clearly a composition that is systematically structured and ordered. Yet, conventional musical elements cannot clearly be defined within this piece. For example, uniformly pulsating beats do not direct the musicians, and the beginnings and ends of measures cannot be marked, nor can any and all variations of musical meters be identified. At best, the rhythm can be described as irregular or free. While the piece operates as a sentient enigma which constantly contradicts itself by introducing non-recurring sections (like a poetic piece), the piece appears to be performed in the style of a "Simon Says" game. The

vocalist, while only singing the word “China” delivers numerous iterations of the word, and the musicians match length and syllables through their playing. While this is done to tease the audience by often filling the air with silence, the method can appear random, however, it is superbly coordinated (Toca Loca, 2008).

While “Made in China” estranges its rhythmic elements, McCarthy’s “Streetcar Harmonics” subverts these music conventions even further by the sheer nature of the “found sound” performance. Within the piece, a streetcar stops on its rails, producing a D major tetrad chord (four notes), and creating a resonant shriek of metal which continues to chime throughout the entire performance. Moreover, there are several moments where certain notes of the D major chord are accented, and ring out louder than others to produce a rhythm of sorts. Otherwise, there are absolutely no manipulations of temporal or rhythmic agency within this piece. Further, the piece’s ringing metal does not have an attributed tempo or meter, as there are no beats which guide the sounds, and there are no measures which exist within this piece, as it is technically one prolonged accented note which decrescendos across the sole phrase of the piece (McCarthy 2012).

In sum, the elements of rhythm present within “Made in China” and “Streetcar Harmonics” are vastly different. One piece utilizes a purposeful amalgamation of eccentric rhythmic properties to create musical innovation, and the other rejects purposeful rhythms to focus rather on the mental and spiritual healing element. This can be perceived as a subversive challenge to the musical paradigm, as both pieces reject the convention of having a discernible rhythm, demonstrate innovational redefinition of contemporary music through new methodical performance, and critiquing whether hyper extravagance or hyper minimalism can qualify as art.

The Musical Element of Texture

Texture can be defined as the perceived harmonious relationship between simultaneously active sound layers (Shelemay 2006). Moreover, the analysis of specific sound sources and their connection to one another, entails the categorization of the overall product as a consequence of melodic, harmonic, polyphonic agency within the piece. Within this context, Toca Loca's "Made in China" can be determined to be homophonic in nature. However, while the piece can be defined within the conventional parameters of music analysis, it pushes the boundaries of the textural paradigm through eccentrically meeting the criteria. For a piece to qualify as homophonic, it must exhibit a distinct melody which is supported by at least two similarly sounding harmonies. While "Made in China" technically achieves this by utilizing vocals as its melody, and the piano and percussion as its harmony, each layer is so uniquely sporadic that the piece could be mistaken as polyphonic—many simultaneous melodic sounds (Shelemay 2006). Although each layered sound source could be considered melodious, given the call and response nature of the piece, it is safe to assume the vocals are the principal component of this work (Toca Loca, 2008).

In contrast, McCarthy's "Streetcar Harmonics" (while determined to be polyphonic in nature) similarly subverts the convention of texture through indirectly meeting the criteria of polyphonic form. As described within Toca Loca's "Made in China," a polyphonic texture means to simultaneously utilize several layers of melodic sound sources. Although "Streetcar Harmonics" includes only two sound sources (the streetcar and a D major tetrad), the piece produces numerous separate intervals of its own accord at various times. This ultimately creates several unique layers, which serve their own distinct functional melody, and support one another in tandem to create the harmonious D major chord (McCarthy 2012). While the utilization of

texture within “Made in China” and “Streetcar Harmonics” vary to some degree, they both successfully re-evaluate the conventional concept of texture within music, to create a contrived transformation of the contemporary. This can be seen within Toca Loca’s utilization of several potential melodies, which critique the convention of a single melodious layer to reject the nostalgia of yesterday’s music. This notion is also present within McCarthy’s rejection of conventional textures by capturing numerous melodic layers which serve as an attempt at critical attentiveness to soundscapes. These challenges of the musical paradigm can ultimately be seen as a notion to subvert the conventional listener’s expectations of texture, a renovative insight into the concepts and methods of contemporary music, and a demonstration of musical pieces which still technically qualify as music despite their deviations from the established paradigm.

The Musical Element of Structure

Structure can be understood as the varying musical qualities, such as pitch, intensity, dynamics, timbre, rhythm, texture, and duration, which ultimately provide the foundation of the distinct musical sections that exist within a composition (Shelemay 2006). Moreover, structure also pertains to form, and the repetitive relationship (or lack thereof) that exists among these sections. For example, a composition which utilizes a “verse, chorus, bridge” structure can be defined as having a form of ‘ABABCA’ (Shelemay 2006). Given this information, Toca Loca’s “Made in China,” while appearing to utilize notions of strophic form by reproducing an insignificant rhythm, ultimately lacks any distinguishable structure. Specific sections are more staccato than others, while different sections increase and decrease in tempo, dynamic intensity, and syncopation of rhythms. Moreover, while the piece does manage to repeat a small motif, in comparison to the sheer number of distinct sections resulting from numerous variations of

rhythm, pitch, dynamic, and atmospheric elements, the piece appears to resemble a prolonged poetic piece, a form of “A” rather than a conventional song (Toca Loca, 2008).

Similarly to Toca Loca’s piece, McCarthy’s “Streetcar Harmonics” also appears to demonstrate a rejection of typical song structure by refusing to adhere to any distinguishable structure at all. As a result of the “found sound” nature of “Streetcar Harmonics,” the musical qualities performed within this piece cannot be identified under a uniform category. This is because while the streetcar halts on its track, the resulting sounds are not deliberately produced, rather, the sounds accidentally create a harmonized D major tetrad, which separately produce dissimilar intervals all throughout the piece. Therefore, because the piece does not have any empirically proven instances of strophic refrain, the piece cannot be given a distinguishably conventional form, and moreover, can only be defined as utilizing “A” form (McCarthy 2012). With reference to the use of structure for both pieces, they similarly refuse the strophic convention, creating a piece which adheres to a single distinct phrase. This can be seen within Toca Loca’s prolonged undistinguishable structure, which promotes a distinct notion of the contemporary, and within McCarthy’s rejection of mainstream music conventions, to critique the white noise of the modern day, and facilitate a faithful adaptation of a soundscape. These crucial choices can be understood as discourses which contest the music paradigm, a reinterpretation of modernity through introducing innovative and inter-practical art concepts, and a genuine experiment of whether prolonged non-repetitive sound can qualify as music.

Connections to the Music Curricula

Both “Made in China” and Streetcar Harmonics” present separate agendas, methods, and culturally opposing social purposes. Moreover, both pieces are instances of paradigms being rethought, and redefined through the innovations of contemporary means. While Toca Loca’s

piece presents new tools to dismantle the elusive frameworks of contemporary art, and McCarthy's piece rejects aberrant music conventions in preference of pure and mentally rejuvenating soundscapes, both pieces rejoice in attempting to listen to music and sound in unique and innovative ways, which impacts and influences music education at all levels.

In a nutshell, music education has been trapped in a vortex where music teachers consistently reproduce their own experiences. The old adage "if we always do what we always did, we will always get what we always got" certainly does not bode well for music education, which is a subject that has consistently subsisted on the periphery of the overall school curricula and that relentlessly attempts to validate its very existence (Lehman, 2020). Much of this philosophy stems from Leonhard's (1985) belief that music educators are responsible for the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage to succeeding generations. Instead, music educators should be cultivating innovative and novel philosophies and not be apprehensive of shortcomings along the way. The incorporation of alternative musical genres such as *New Music* and *Acoustic Ecology* in the music classroom is necessary for music education. Even if music teachers incorporate such alternative genres solely as a listening exercise focussed on (but not limited to) rhythm, texture, and structure (or lack thereof), it will be a step in the right direction. Opportunities for students to perform and even compose within such alternative genres would obviously be the next logical step.

Final Thoughts

Teaching alternative musical genres is not as easy as flipping on a switch. Music teachers must commit to being lifelong students of music well-beyond their formal musical education. It is only by authentically expanding their own musical experiences, traditions, and practices that music teachers can genuinely and effectively use them in the classroom. Hence, music teachers

themselves must be committed to experiencing and understanding alternative musical genres such as *New Music* and *Acoustic Ecology*. Furthermore, these musical genres also challenge music education curricula in most Western nations, particularly when it comes to rhythm, texture, and structure.

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