

## Article

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### "Off the Map? Sonic Art in the New Media Landscape"

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# Off the Map? —

## Sonic Art in the New Media Landscape

Joseph Hyde

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Much has been written (and many post-concert bar conversations based) on the place of Sonic Art<sup>1</sup> on the popular/classical music axis. Many have argued that this division is no longer meaningful — for me this is so self-evident as to require no argument. However, I believe there is nonetheless a broader question as to the place this music occupies in the current cultural climate which is of genuine importance. I have little personal interest in pigeonholing, but I also observe that in an age of information overload, that which cannot be identified, placed and filed has a tendency to simply disappear through the gaps. I believe the reason that most people haven't even heard of Sonic Art (let alone heard it) is not due to the inherent nature of the medium, but simply because it is effectively unclassified, and therefore invisible (and inaudible).

In order for audiences to encounter Sonic Art, they need to be able to find it, and in order to be find-able it needs to have a clearly identifiable place on the cultural landscape. To use a simple but pertinent illustration/example — if Tower Records don't know what shelf to put it on, they are unlikely to stock it. Those who champion the form, whether as practitioners, promoters or enthusiasts, are not necessarily clear as to what the 'correct' position might be. This may be due to different viewpoints (cf. the list of terms in the footnote), because this position is in flux, or because this music does not have a 'home' at all.

The most prevalent standpoint would be to place Sonic Art as a subset of Contemporary Music, itself a subset of Classical Music which is in turn a subset of Music, a subset itself of The Arts. However, this position would certainly not be accepted by all concerned and in my view constitutes an unnecessary marginalisation of what is potentially a culturally-relevant force. I also believe that many of the terms involved in this definition or 'placing' are inappropriate, inaccurate, or themselves in flux. I will attempt to deconstruct this categorisation in this article, and point up some ideas for an alternative positioning.

1. Without wanting to expend too much page space on definitions, I am using this term in a reasonably broad sense, encompassing Electroacoustic, Computer Music and Acousmatic Music but not (for purposes of this article) Electronica or related genres.

## Art and Media 1

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Right from the outset we are on swampy ground, simply by defining Sonic Art as 'art'. The Arts are at best in flux, at worst in decline. What is generally perceived as mainstream art (if there is such a thing) is firmly rooted in the distant past; primarily the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; part of our ever-growing museum culture. Most contemporary forms are minority interests with little direct or widespread cultural influence.

Most dictionary definitions of art are surprisingly broad. Most centre around the deployment of (specifically human) skill — an art is a skill, Art is the resultant of that skill. Human endeavour is seen as distinct from (and arguably in opposition to) the 'chaos' of nature, and art is seen as the highest form of that endeavour, the most sophisticated form of artifice.

'The Arts' (plural) is used to denote a set of art-forms (painting, poetry, music etc.) that can be defined by the people involved (eg., painters), the skills employed (painting), and/or the media used (paint).

Only the last of these is entirely reliable — the phenomenon of 'found art' (Duchamp, Cage, etc.), arguably the most radical force in 20<sup>th</sup> century art, has shown that both creator and creating can be dispensed with. However, it is difficult to entirely deconstruct away the actual 'stuff' or media involved — it is hard to envisage painting without paint, poetry without words (or something similar) or music without sound. In our post-Postmodern era, definitions of art in terms of skills or human endeavour are not necessarily accurate. It can also be argued that a definition of art as artifice is no longer relevant, since our culture has reached a stage where nearly everything we experience has to some degree been altered, mediated or made artificial.

Perhaps this means we need a new definition of art that is not couched in terms of the creator or the act of creating, but rather in terms of the media involved. At this point we should note that the term 'The Media' has particular meaning, and that this meaning is rather close to that which I describe above. Television, for instance, might be described in terms of the people involved or the skills employed, but instead it is described in terms of the way in which it is packaged and consumed, *i.e.*, (evidently) Television.

This is a contentious view indeed; but one might argue that there is in fact an arts mainstream which is not rooted primarily in the past, but that we term it The Media. Certainly most of the new creative outlets opened up by electronic technology (cheap, fast mass-produced print, video, electronically stored and/or transmitted sound) are generally thus classified rather than described as Arts. These forms are in many ways supplanting older forms, with audiences for example watching television

rather than going to the theatre, or listening to the radio or a CD instead of going to a concert.

## High and Low 1

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The idea of The Media (henceforth I shall use the term media) in some way supplanting The Arts (art) would be horrifying to many, but I suspect that objections would not concern the terms themselves, but rather a perception of what constitutes media. This term often has rather negative connotations, and understandably so. Media is (are?) by its nature ubiquitous (since most forms involve some form of broadcasting), to such a degree that its influence can be seen as overbearing. Most of us would find it difficult to argue that this influence is entirely positive or benign.

Much of what constitutes media is undeniably of low quality or intent, and the term certainly does not reflect the aspirational quality usually assigned to art. However, much that is admirable, virtuosic and genuinely new has been perpetrated in the name of media. Without entering into the impossible task of defining exactly which is which, I firmly believe that one can talk of 'good media' and 'bad media'<sup>2</sup>. This kind of division has traditionally existed in the arts also, where we talk of 'high art' and 'low art'. Again, the dividing line is contentious, but at the extremes the margins are comfortable (the 19<sup>th</sup> century German symphonic tradition, the 19<sup>th</sup> century English Music Hall).

If we are to treat art and media as in any way equivalent, it might be perceived that there is much, much more high art than good media, but such a perception should be treated with suspicion. What we denote as high art is the very best of more than a millennium of human endeavour — for every Mozart, the natural selection of hindsight has weeded out many Dittersdorfs (who?).

2. While the dividing line is difficult territory, I can safely give some examples I would term 'good' — HBO TV series *Six Feet Under*, Richard D. James/Chris Cunningham's various collaborations, the work of Chris Morris. I don't think I need to give examples of bad media!

## High and Low 2

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Returning to my 'placing' of Sonic Art, moving back through our list of nested categories, neatly sidestepping 'music' (I don't want to open that particular can of worms here), we reach 'Classical Music' and 'Contemporary Music'. Both terms are somewhat suspect — the former being a misappropriation of a term describing a

particular period in music history, the latter implying a nonsensical division within today's music between that which is contemporary and that which is not. Of course, in reality both terms are concerned with delineating high from low art, 'serious' music from popular music.

This is a problematic division not in principal but in practice. I think most of us would acknowledge that some music is more 'serious' in intent than others, but again, drawing the dividing line is extremely difficult. I certainly believe that the boundary as currently drawn is woefully inadequate — if we stick to the standard map and definitions, everything that is not 'contemporary music' must be 'popular music', and the latter term must embrace everything from Britney Spears to Squarepusher. The latter cannot in reality be described as 'popular', and produces music which is highly evolved, complex and skilful.

Any model based on the past cannot fully apply — technology, and in particular media, has changed our cultural landscape to such a degree that society and its cultural needs are very different from what they once were. Paradoxically, unpopularity is often used as a measure of artistic worth, and it is claimed that the works of Mozart and Beethoven (for example) were considered awkward and difficult in their day. This may be true in some instances, but I would argue that both these composers fully occupied the mainstream — their music may have been enjoyed by a minority, but that minority was the societal elite. Both literally worked 'where the money is'. It is also worth noting that the concept of 'popular music' is very much a 20<sup>th</sup> century one<sup>3</sup>. 'Low' music of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries consisted of folk music, largely highly localised and in that sense achieving a far lesser degree of universal popularity than the likes of Mozart or Beethoven. This is an uncomfortable thought; but one might argue that the roots of high and low culture actually lie in class snobbery.

Media is often cited as having a democratising effect. This is not always a convincing argument, but it is certainly true that media has brought about a quantum shift in the cultural landscape. 'Where the money is' is no longer with the few but rather with the many. Popular music can in no way be described as contemporary folk music. It is rather a highly sophisticated, developed and virtuosic form. In terms of person hours, technical sophistication and marketing, a Britney Spears album will probably outstrip anything by Squarepusher or indeed Michel Chion — it will certainly have a much larger budget. It will have entirely different aims, but in its simple quest to sell as many units as possible will be precision-engineered to the nearest micron.

Most popular culture is in fact incredibly sophisticated, and relies on an experienced audience with a palate that could almost be described as jaded. This is illustrated by the current tendency of popular culture to become increasingly self-referential — something like Pop Idol ostensibly lets the audience 'in on the joke' and makes entertainment out of the very mechanics that a few years ago would have been carefully hidden.

3. I write this advisedly — it is my belief that the term will not last far into the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Indeed, if one could describe anything as 'folk' or 'grass roots music' today it might actually be much of what is new and innovative. This is certainly the case within club culture — the two genuinely new forms of the last few decades are Hip Hop and Techno, and both began life as incredibly localised sub-cultural movements, with very little exposure, finance or wide-scale interest.

One might even argue that Sonic Art is becoming increasingly similar in its *modus operandi*, depending more and more on communities (albeit not necessarily localised ones — perhaps in the age of the internet this is no longer relevant). It is possible that this shift contains the seeds of its survival.

## Convergence and Divergence

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If we are to attempt to place Sonic Art within a media context, we must acknowledge that this media is itself in a state of flux. A well-documented process is that of media convergence. It is certainly true that new relationships have formed and are forming between media previously seen as separate; that audiences are expecting more of their senses to be engaged more of the time, and that over-sophisticated media palates are being stimulated by collisions between unlikely forms and genres.

While I believe sound-only work is entirely valid and relevant, and that it has a strong role in encouraging the use of the ears in a visually-dominated age, I also believe that there is a crucial place for experimental and innovative sound work within new multimedia forms. Sound for sound's sake actually appears to be quite 'fashionable' at the moment, and there are at least some signs that the supremacy of the visual may be under threat. This is perhaps largely a matter of technology — the early internet was an exclusively visual entity simply because bandwidths were too low (and compression technologies too basic) to allow any meaningful use of sound. Many recently-introduced domestic technologies, from MP3 compression to Dolby 5.1, are focusing much more attention on the sonic.

The possibilities of DVD in particular, offering a high-quality multichannel sound format that shows some signs of actually achieving widespread acceptance, are extremely exciting. Previous multimedia formats (VHS, etc.) assigned very little of their available bandwidth to sound, by definition consigning it to the role of poor relation. However, DVD offers a much more equal playing field, and one in which one might conceive of audiovisual releases where the sound is more important than the visual. Two of the most innovative and respected record labels in the UK, Ninja Tune (a peculiarly British take on Hip Hop) and Warp (a peculiarly British take on techno!) have both recently established DVD labels. One of the first DVD releases from Warp was *Ganz Graf* by Autechre with visuals from Alexander Rutterford

(Warp WAP256DVD), which is possibly the most intricate and cutting-edge digital sound/video fusion I have seen.

This kind of convergence is taking place not only between media, but between genres. Many recent musical forms have been built explicitly on one form of 'culture clash' or another. What is often termed 'breakbeat culture' (Hip Hop and related sample-based forms such as drum and bass) has at its heart the idea of collage. The Hip Hop DJ has brought into the cultural mainstream the almost Cageian idea that one can be musically creative by putting to good use an extremely large and carefully-selected record collection rather than by originating sounds 'from the ground up'.

DJ Shadow is often cited as the supreme master of vinyl collage, and indeed his 1994 album *Endtroducing* (Mo Wax 540 607-2) was a stunning example of this technique. Since then, there are several artists (including Shadow) who have taken the possibilities of collage to a new level. RJD2's first record *Deadringer* (Definitive Jux DJX35) is close enough to early Shadow that some critics have accused it of being derivative, but at its best I think it offers a degree of unselfconscious integration between wildly different musical styles as to be really quite new. For me, the most advanced proponent of such 'genre bending' is Amon Tobin. His early releases occupy a brand of jazz-inflected drum and bass that was fashionable at the time (mid-nineties), but in his two most recent records, *Supermodified* (Ninja Tune ZEN CD48) and *Out from Out Where* (Ninja Tune ZEN CD70), he has fused wildly divergent samples into a sound that is so smoothly integrated as to be almost impossible to pigeonhole.

Several current musical movements are explicitly based on jarring juxtaposition. 'Bootlegging' (a DJ playing two wildly different records at the same time) has probably already had its day, but threw up some interesting things along the way. 'Electroclash' is/was also so painfully fashionable that it will almost certainly be short-lived, but at its best has produced some interesting work. Berlin-based label Kitty-yo bring together Hip Hop and Techno (arguably club culture's *Musique Concrete* and *Elektronische Musik*) together in a sometimes fascinating juxtaposition.

One interesting point about these genres and ideas is that they could be seen as representing a process of divergence as much as one of convergence — media and styles can be seen to have fused and clashed, then fragmented along new lines. This is a process that could be said to have taken place at many crucial junctures in artistic and cultural history.

Sonic Art should perhaps be the broadest of churches, embracing any work that makes interesting and original use of sound, but rather the term tends to be associated with a fairly narrow and prescribed range of work, and furthermore the field is subdivided into various 'schools' with even more specific characteristics and traditions. I would personally welcome less 'purity' and more crossovers into other media or styles. This need not represent a process of dilution, but rather one of (positive) upheaval and reinvigoration.

## Art and Media 2

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I believe the cultural 'invisibility' of Sonic Art is mainly due to those involved in the medium adhering (in the main) to a model of art, society and culture firmly rooted in the past; in late Romantic/Modernist ideals of the 'genius author', high-minded artistic ideals and stylistic purity. There is nothing wrong with these principles, but they could be argued to be somewhat out of place in today's cultural landscape, which is in many ways a resultant of Postmodernism; a world in which ideas of the creator and the creative process have been thoroughly deconstructed, and boundaries are constantly in flux.

As I have outlined above, there are many aspects of today's media-dominated cultural landscape that one may view negatively rather than positively, and there is a strong case to be argued for battling or subverting the status quo rather than simply joining the party. However, this is arguably best accomplished by entering into the discourse rather than operating in an entirely 'other' sphere.

One can see exactly this process taking place in some areas of artistic activity — the recent over-hyped phenomenon of 'Britart' (Damien Hurst, Sarah Lucas, *et al.*) was excessively mediatized; arguably its most important figure being a media magnate of sorts (Charles Saatchi). A characteristic of much of the work produced by these artists is that it is highly media-friendly. I have observed that many of the best-known pieces have a quality that makes for perfect tabloid headlines (*Pickled Shark Frightens Gallery Visitors, Scandal of Fried Food Sex Organs, Elephant Dung on Painting Causes Controversy*). One might justifiably call this 'Soundbite Art'.

Some aspects of the new media landscape in particular might be exploited to the benefit of a minority interest such as Sonic Art — in particular, a continuing kind of cultural 'decentralisation' that is in many ways resulting in a more even playing field. In particular, I believe that the age of the Hit Parade and any kind of universal popular music (always an illusion) is passing. Pop is rapidly becoming just another genre alongside Rock, RnB, Hip Hop, Electronica, Classical, Jazz, Easy Listening, etc. In the (bastardised) words of the British Indie Band, Pop has eaten itself.

Such a fragmented landscape is evidently capable of supporting many many 'niche markets', some of which may command vast international audiences and turnovers of billions of dollars, while others are strictly minority interests kept alive by dedicated enthusiasts. Communications technologies such as the internet can be seen to be making it far easier to sustain such communities across geographical boundaries, while the sophistication of even the cheapest PCs makes it entirely possible to envisage high-tech media (such as Sonic Art) as 'Cottage Industries'. Many other genres (some now mainstream) began life as such 'grass roots' movements based on subversions of cheap mass-produced technology — Hip Hop found a

new use for the turntable, Techno for tacky Kareoke gadgets (the Roland TB-303), and arguably Electronica for the PC. If we can shed some of the baggage of the past and embrace such a cultural paradigm, we may find ourselves a new place on the map.

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