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# Survival Strategies for Electroacoustic Music

Darren Copeland

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## Introduction

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What is the future of electroacoustic music? This is a current and frequent subject of debate by practitioners in the field. Alternative dance/club musicians are incorporating samples of early electroacoustic and avant garde works into their pieces, such as DJ Spooky's remixes of Xenakis, Stockhausen, and others (DJ Spooky, 1997) and are adopting early methods of sound creation like analog synthesizers and analog sound processing into their production techniques. Similarly, younger electroacoustic artists are bringing elements of this alternative music into the academic and avant garde concert music context. The environment of government sponsorship for artistic experimentation in which electroacoustic music was born has either disintegrated altogether or is eroding significantly from the kind of support granted in years past. What are the implications of these developments? Will electroacoustic music diverge from its academic routes and assimilate into the alternative streams of mainstream westernized culture? Or will it remain faithful to its Avant Garde roots, maintaining its artistic integrity while subsisting in cultural obscurity?

Having studied electroacoustic composition with two electroacoustic pioneers, Martin Bartlett and Barry Truax, at Simon Fraser University and with Jonty Harrison in Birmingham, UK, I am familiar with the academic electroacoustic tradition. As Artistic Director of New Adventures in Sound Art, I am a producer of electroacoustic and experimental sound art performances and installations. I will attempt in this essay to confront the issue of social relevance and public impact of electroacoustic music from both of these perspectives. It is my goal as a producer to increase the audience for electroacoustic music. However, in so doing I strive not to compromise the aesthetic goals of the artists that I present, because the spirit of experimentation was one of the qualities that attracted me to electroacoustic composition in the first place.

## Contextual background

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It is important to distinguish between a “general audience” and a “mainstream audience.” The difference to me is that a general audience is one that through the marketing and publicity of an electroacoustic event experiences electroacoustic music for the first time and does not hold any professional or personal connection to the artists or organizers of the event. A mainstream audience, however, represents the same achievement but on a much larger scale where audience and sales figures are tallied in the hundreds of thousands or millions. I’m afraid I do not possess the black magic to reach a mainstream audience, but I do have some solutions for expanding the audience for electroacoustic music into that “general audience” category. This is particularly true from the perspective of the local context where I produce electroacoustic events, since in Toronto electroacoustic music has not historically been well supported by the arts community. I strongly believe that in order to secure a healthy future for electroacoustic music, efforts need to be made by event producers to attract more of a general audience to their activities rather than accepting audiences made up of mainly family, friends and professional associates.

Broadly defined, electroacoustic music is a practice involving creative experimentation with sound. For the purpose of this essay my definition refers to the electroacoustic music established in the 1950’s with the founding of studios for sound experimentation at the national radio stations in Paris and Köln (among others) and that followed in the avant-garde concert music tradition (Griffiths, 1978, p. 158). By the mid 1970’s electroacoustic music studios had two identities: those based in North America were housed in universities and music conservatories; those in Europe continued to receive support from national radio and other government-run institutions in Europe. The production of concerts was primarily supported by these institutions, and through this activity evolved national and international conferences and festivals where audiences consisted for the most part of practitioners in the field attending from out of town locations<sup>1</sup>. It is through this subsidized environment that electroacoustic music developed in the early years. This allowed for its continued production in the face of the high cost of sound and computer technology before the mass popularity of personal computers in the 1990’s.

After the mid-1990’s, government support for the arts, particularly in North America, was reduced significantly and in some cases was eliminated altogether. With government-run organizations having played a key role in providing public access to technology, it became a matter of time before these institutions lost relevance when the financial barrier for obtaining electroacoustic technology was significantly lowered. This outcome precipitated the question over the social relevance of electroacoustic music itself since it was strongly associated with these institutions. An increasing number of artists were emerging after 1995 with their own personal

1. The ICMC conference held in a different international location every year and the Synthèse festival in Bourges, France, are two of the largest gatherings of this kind.

studios that did not require the direct intervention of these institutions. This could have brought an end to electroacoustic music. However, there is enough new activity in the field, witnessed by the expansion in categories and entrants in the Bourges competition in recent years and the many other electroacoustic composition competitions around the world that have sprung up, to say that the end is not here even if the future of electroacoustic music is being debated and the audience numbers remain low.

## Reaching a general audience

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In order for electroacoustic music to stay alive, a transition is necessary for the government-run institutions and smaller organizations supporting electroacoustic music to replace losses in government funding with earned income through concert box office admissions, CD sales, private donations and, most importantly, corporate sponsorships. This is an obstacle faced by other arts institutions and organizations in North America, including symphonies, art galleries, and museums. By shifting the emphasis of their activity from research and creation to dissemination and education, producers and smaller community-based organizations can help facilitate a significant level of public support for the practice without having to dilute its aesthetic goals and explorative character with commercial ambitions. The universities and other government-run institutions can still provide public access to technology, but this should be limited to the goal of educating people new to the art form, rather than to facilitating creation by professionals in the field. The focus then is on teaching and disseminating knowledge. In the community, it is the responsibility of producer organizations to create a profile for electroacoustic music, so that the audience for concert performances and CD publications can expand and reach a general audience.

In 1998, I started New Adventures in Sound Art in Toronto. I founded the organization in a local climate where government support for the arts had already undergone significant cutbacks and where there was no producer or academic institution in the city specializing in the dissemination or education of electroacoustic music. Therefore, knowledge of electroacoustic music was very small and the available audience limited to a handful of independent freelance artists.

I felt that my organization could change this difficult climate into a better one by focusing on the creation of a new audience for electroacoustic music while operating with a reasonable degree of autonomy. In order to build this new audience, the aspects of electroacoustic music that I felt were socially relevant to the community had to be brought into the foreground, such as in the following examples:

Presentation of issue-oriented electroacoustic works in the field that could be targeted to audiences who held those issues dear. There are many fine electroacoustic works that are programmatic in nature and tackle social issues still important

today. Why not target their presentation to the communities most affected by the issues presented in the works and hold a Q/A session afterwards with the artist to get that community's feedback?

Providing soundscape artists with a forum for addressing issues of noise abatement being debated publicly in city council through the creation of pieces about urban soundscapes and the programming of noise debates in contexts where environmental noise is at its highest. *The Toronto Sound Mosaic* documented the historical evolution of the Toronto Soundscape (Copeland & Windeyer, 2000) while the issue of noise as a health hazard was under review by the Toronto Board of Health for potential adjustments to the Toronto noise by-law (Toronto Public Health, 2000). The 2001 edition of *Sound Travels* presented a public noise debate on Toronto Island moderated by radio artist Tim Wilson. This was held amidst the sound of military jets screaming overhead during the Air Show at the Canadian National Exhibition.<sup>2</sup>

Present sound installations and soundwalks in tourist areas so that people new to electroacoustic music will have the opportunity to interact with the art form and its artists. The 2001 listing of the *Sound Travels* soundwalk in the Heritage Toronto calendar of historical walks brought 75 people directly to a sound installation and the artists were on hand to give a guided tour and artist talk. I realized how valuable this new audience was simply because they approached the installation with curiosity and openness. That same attitude has been evident to me at the installations *New Adventures in Sound Art* has organized in alternative public sites like Metro Square<sup>3</sup> and Toronto Island Filtration Plant and the presentation of my sound installation *Soundscape Carillon* in the foyer of Kitchener City Hall by the Open Ears festival.

Community radio can be another resource for dissemination. I have found that they are very helpful in presenting electroacoustic music on the radio and for promoting electroacoustic events. *New Adventures in Sound Art*, for instance, produces a twice-monthly radio show on CKLN 88.1 FM in Toronto. Also, CKLN is a partner in the Radio Art Interventions, which are one-minute samples of radio art programmed randomly on the radio for one month during the Deep Wireless festival. Such partnerships are not difficult to establish in North America and are particularly important in very small communities where campus and community radio stations sometimes play a big role in the local cultural life.

Invite artists from other backgrounds to create a new electroacoustic work. This not only stretches the vocabulary of the electroacoustic medium but it circulates it into other communities that may not have knowledge of electroacoustic music. For instance, electroacoustic producers could co-produce opportunities with organizations that represent artists in film, radio or other disciplines where sound is used extensively. Another example leads back to my opening comments in that organizations like l'ACREQ in Montreal have expanded the audience for electroacoustic music significantly in their community by collaborating with organizations and groups in the electronica scene and by mixing artists from the academic and club scenes in the same events.<sup>4</sup>

2. – Toronto Island is a vehicle free zone whose peace and quiet is interrupted by flight traffic not only from the annual flight demonstration but also from a nearby city centre airport scheduled for significant expansion in the coming years.

3. *Response Time* by John Wynne, presented in 2001.  
[www.soundtravels.ca/response.html](http://www.soundtravels.ca/response.html)

4. See the programming for l'ACREQ's Elektra festival documented at [www.elektrafestival.ca](http://www.elektrafestival.ca) for examples of how integrated the two fields are. Their programming also extends out into the media arts and visual arts communities as well.

To develop this last point further, the more creative access is limited, the smaller the number of people there will be in the local community to support the art form. Not everyone that gets introduced to electroacoustics will emerge as an award-winning composer. Some of those people might become important advocates for the field in other sectors, such as commercial businesses, chamber and symphony groups, print and broadcast media, film, politics, law, and others that the electroacoustic community is going to need on its side in order to prosper and grow through the century ahead. It has been my experience in the arts that patrons emerge among people who had contact with the arts in their youth and young adult years, but in later years had to choose a career path outside the arts that was more economically profitable. In these cases it is my view that their patronage would not be a reality had they not first had a personal affection for the art-making process itself. Although *New Adventures in Sound Art* cannot directly influence education policy, it can influence the make-up of the artists it chooses to present in order to encourage access points to the electroacoustic field outside the traditional academic musical milieu.

Producer organizations can increase the product knowledge of electroacoustic music in their local communities by educating the audience that attends its events. Workshops, booklets, seminars, artist talks, guided installation tours, and soundwalks are just some of the examples that producers can organize in connection with their events to increase awareness about sound in their community and electroacoustic music. These activities should not use terminology foreign to a beginner who represents the level of the target audience. Building product knowledge empowers new audience members by providing a greater understanding of the art form. The greater their knowledge, the larger the investment they will make. This investment does not have to translate into large donations, but merely into a steady increase in box office and other sales so that audience sizes in the future will begin at 100 people rather than level off at that number, which they currently do in North America.

Attitude is important in making the shift towards appealing to a general audience. When I produced the *Wireless Graffiti* performances with Norman Armour of Rumble Theatre in 1993,<sup>5</sup> I was inspired by his notion that if you put ideas out there and don't apologize for them, audiences can make sense of them and respond in their own way. If the reaction is negative, then at least attention has been awarded and people have taken notice of something they may not have known about before. Presenting something without apology means going forward confidently and assertively and not hiding behind past criticisms of the art form or particular financial or physical constraints. A new audience would not be aware of the history or of the grade of loudspeakers used in a performance. I don't want to provide presenters with an excuse for using lower grade equipment or venues with poor acoustics, but once the show begins there will be pieces that will be received positively by an audience and others that will not.

The way electroacoustic artists conduct their professional affairs in the community also has an impact on general audience appeal. They can give their professional

5. *Wireless Graffiti* was two live-to-air radio performances in June 1993 co-produced by Rumble Theatre and Vancouver Pro Musica.

partners in the surrounding community more guidance by taking a more active role in aspects of production that affect the composition or sound design but that do not involve the act of composing or designing sound. For example, in the context of a show with electroacoustic music presented by a dance company, a chamber ensemble, or a visual art gallery, areas of responsibility for the electroacoustic artist should also include hiring, setting up, and, if necessary, operating the sound system for performance if such expertise is not available within the staffing of the producing organization. Extra time should be spent with performers to develop an instrumental or orchestral part so that the performers are sensitive to the unique demands of the piece both in interpretation and in listening.

Personal investments on the part of electroacoustic artists will go a long way in building roots in the local communities in which these artists operate and receive their public support. In the case of orchestras and choirs, the membership of these groups and their associated pool of friends, family, and colleagues spread deep into smaller communities, so a positive experience with electroacoustic music can factor very strongly in future commissions and collaborations. In the context of film, techniques familiar to electroacoustics have already been assimilated into the sound design vocabulary. It is perhaps a matter of artists collaborating in this field to push the envelope further, and for organizations producing electroacoustic music to make stronger ties with the film audience, such as the production of electroacoustic concerts in cinemas.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>. The Immersion series curated by Philip Samartzis in Melbourne, Australia presented electroacoustic works at a local cinema.

## Conclusion

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In conclusion, artists in the electroacoustic field, and the organizations and institutions that support their work, will not survive if they don't reach out to their communities. They must advocate for the field, and make healthy connections with the local communities around them in order to spread knowledge, understanding, and interest in electroacoustic music. This does not require a big marketing budget and does not need to happen on a mainstream level of public impact. It is a matter of building partnerships with organizations and businesses that have access to audiences with interests in related areas. Once that audience is in attendance, then it is important that extra efforts be made to support their investment in the field with access to understandable accounts of its history and aesthetics as well as by insuring their works presented in the show are relevant to the context and that production constraints are viewed as creative variables rather than obstacles.

Of course, only time will tell if my approach to the survival of electroacoustic music impacts positively, at least here in Toronto, but I'm confident that the increasing audience attendance for New Adventures in Sound Art events is a good sign of

things to come. I'm sure that many readers involved in electroacoustic music could add more ideas to the ones I have shared from my personal experience. The main goal is to reach out into local communities in order to build a larger base of public support for electroacoustic music. I feel strongly that this will reflect positively on funds for commissions, performances, foreign travel funding, CD production, and other key parts of the survival puzzle for practicing electroacoustic artists. A healthy influx of funding for these areas will help renew the social relevancy of electroacoustic music. Thus, it is my conclusion that a positive public impact in a community is directly proportional to the financial support necessary to cultivate artistic growth and renewal.

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CKLN 88.1FM — [www.ckln.fm](http://www.ckln.fm)

Elektra festival — [www.elektrafestival.ca](http://www.elektrafestival.ca)

