

Against the stage

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I often find myself struggling with show organizers and technicians over all the 'complications' brought forth by my persistent refusal to play on stage. This can happen in any kind of space, from obscure clubs to concert halls; across the whole range of 'scenes' and communities, from classical / contemporary music to rock / techno environments, or even 'experimental' events. Worldwide. The stage is everywhere. It is inextricably attached to the performance of live music.

While this seems to be the natural order of things for most musicians, it is a serious problem for me. Furthermore, I believe it is also a serious problem for music itself; at least for a certain conception / appreciation of music involving a strong absolute sense, which not only does not require the stage but is also fundamentally affected by it. I am talking about the dissipative action of the stage on the sonic material itself and, consequently, on all the potential levels of experience and transformation sparked by the latter, from the perceptual to the spiritual.

This is a complex and variegated story that started long ago and I will just refer here to some of its more recent consequences. Rock / pop culture has inherited -- or has accepted -- the stage as an essential feature of its public realization directly from the traditions of opera, concert halls and variety shows (these being, in turn, transpositions to music of the more ancient strand of theater), which developed and constituted its dominance over a period of more than two hundred years prior to the apparition of rock. In this tradition, the dedicated contemplation of the vocal / instrumental performance is a key element of the music event. Besides the obvious differences, a rock / pop show shares this devoted contemplation of the music-making on stage. In rock / pop it takes a variety of forms, from appreciation of musicianship (as also happens so fiercely in jazz) to idolization to pure mega-spectacle. These combine in different ways and are sometimes all present and all intensified in a synergistic manner, as in heavy metal (which in many respects is a modern form of intense opera).

Now, I don't have anything against this form of contemplation per se (besides my personal lack of interest in it) and I do understand its appeal and cultural significance. Nor I am referring to issues of power / dominance, which I find misleading and irrelevant for this discussion. The situation becomes more problematic when we look at what could be considered as the more recent qualitative transposition of the stage: that from rock / pop to electronic music. By electronic music I refer here to music manifestations that have electronic means of production, transformation and diffusion of sound in the foreground of its practice and its aesthetics, from classical electroacoustic to underground 'experimental' music to electronica. It seems that both artists and audience of electronic music have also inertly accepted this inherited tradition in the live presentation of the music. Even to perplexing situations on stage such as symbolically substituting performers by speakers, manipulating a bunch of analog electronics on a table, sitting in front of a laptop or upgrading the DJ to on-stage status.

What rock / pop shares in this respect with classical music is the visible intricacy of instrument playing. The degree of appreciation of a violin soloist or an electric guitar solo come to a common ground for both the classic music and the rock / pop aficionado, and this actually indicates a relevant shared area in the system of values in music for both of them. Masterful skills resulting from years of practice, discipline, knowledge of the instrument and, in the best case, a touch of genius for its control and 'expression'.

From my perspective, electronic music doesn't need this. Of course it can have it, it can develop its own versions of it (as indeed it does). But it's not inherent to it, it's not a natural consequence of the practices and essential manners of the operations of electronic music, but rather a symbolic acceptance of a tradition of a very different nature (in this regard, probably an opposite nature). What is more important, I believe, is that by blindly following this tradition it wastes the potential for strengthening a most important breakthrough in music of perhaps historical proportions.

One of the better and most significant qualities of the practice of today's electronic music (especially after the aesthetic and technological liberation that occurred during the 80s and 90s) is the forceful absence of the mastery of the instrument. This is due to two main reasons: (1) the disembodied electronic instrument of today (collections of variable electronic modules connected in all sorts of combinations, pieces of software, etc.) mutates constantly, (2) the access to each one of its mutations by sound creators (that is, anyone willing to be such a thing) is virtually instantaneous. I'm not talking about the degree of accessibility of the technological means, which is obviously different in diverse regions of the world and for different groups of individuals, but rather about the fact that, given a certain mutation of the electronic instrument (say, a basic free-downloadable sound software) in the hands of a person, the time needed to start creating with it (to a thrilling extent in many cases) is outrageously minimal, if not zero. Needless to say, this doesn't necessarily mean that the instant creation is of 'quality' (this is a whole other issue), but it doesn't mean the opposite either. What I'm saying is that I believe that the mastery (if any) is spiritual and personal, not technical. More so than ever before in the practice of music.

While in the previous tradition of instrumental music each kind of sound corresponds to a certain gesture and to a specific physical instrument, in electronic music every possible sound is produced with the same click of a mouse, pushing of a button or turning of a knob. I don't find anything interesting in showing / contemplating these actions (if they are visible at all). But what is more relevant is that by doing so -- by sticking to this scenic tradition -- one is unnecessarily assuming the constraints and pitfalls of the somewhat absurd schizophrenic split in space and into separate individual people between the generative action and the actual control of sound, which happened historically as a consequence of the application of electricity in live music.

The electronic amplification of instruments in rock / pop (and also jazz) has naturally created two strangely separated areas of sonic experience and control in the space where the live music takes place. What the musicians on stage hear, through the monitors, and what the audience hears, through the main PA, are two different things; quite different things. Not only in terms of volume (the musicians can be unknowingly blasting the audience, or the contrary, which in most cases they would consider even worse), but also with regards to any other imaginable property of the sonic matter in the audience area. It is the sound technician in the back of the room who is really creating that (by mixing, EQ-ing, panning, routing, balancing of speakers, etc.). In a way, from the position of the audience, the musicians have control over the generative part of the process, but the sound technician has the control over the final phenomenological part of it, with all its consequences. Of course the bands take pains at hiring good, akin sound technicians but, because of the stage, they have to keep this sonic splitting anyway.

One of the beautiful advantages of electronic music is that it allows the reunification of these two sonic spaces and of these two personas. Turning the spatial electronic separation between generative action and sound source into an advantage instead of a constraint. Because the sound radiates from his / her position, the player of an acoustic instrument cannot be the generative actor and the receptor-as-audience at the same time. For three different reasons the electronic musician can. First, because of the alluded to electronic separation, which allows him / her to be in the audience area hearing what the audience is hearing. Second, because of the possibility of simultaneous control

over generative and phenomenological aspects of sound (that is, 'playing' and 'making the sound' at the same time). While the rock lead guitar could hardly EQ his / her sound while doing the tricky solo, the electronic musician is normally doing it as he / she tweeks around a myriad of other things. And third, because of a much smaller scale gear set-up (instead of a large area with drumkit, space for microphones, guitars, etc.), which makes possible a closer approximation to the receptor-as-audience situation and also to minimize the portion of the 'hot spot' area not available for the public. (There are other obvious reasons why a rock band wouldn't like to be in the middle of the audience and at their same level, but these have nothing to do with the issues here).

Having nothing to contemplate visually in the traditional sense makes possible the departure from frontal sound. As opposed to the directionality of visual elements, sound is perceived coming from every direction. Even the panorama solution implies instant directionality of the perception. Sound perception is simultaneously multi-directional. In a live event this allows immersion, intensified phenomenological experience, to 'be inside' the sound instead of listening to it, achievable by very simple and widely available technical means: An array of speakers around the audience controlled from the center of the space.

Now, obviously such an array alone doesn't solve the main 'contemplation' issue. In fact, it is even commonly used to intensify the visual focus on the musician in the center of the space by means of spotlights, regardless of the sound having been dislocated from that visual source (as it happens in show arenas). This comes as no surprise, given our tradition of habituation and conditioning -- from film and amplified speech -- to the automatic connection between seen source and dislocated sound. So even though there's neither an elevated platform nor a frontal sound system, the core essence of the stage for contemplation is there, as strong as it could possibly be.

This brings us to another core of the problem: the dissipative action of visual elements on the sonic material. There are indeed possible integrations of sound and image (and this is also another whole issue), even to the point of not making sense to separate them. But this doesn't mean we need to have some 'visuals' or reinforce the performance aspects of music-making to make the live presentation more appealing. It really gets tiring to see so many instances of this in the electronic scene. It is a kind of slavishness to mainstream media culture. Multimedia is a possibility -- it has always been a possibility -- but considering it a step forward in a sequence of technological developments and social aesthetics shows an ignorance of history of gigantic proportions. The lack of interest in the performance aspect of electronic music is an advantage, not the contrary, as a lot of people seem to think. It is indeed an immense advantage, because it naturally leads to an intense focus on the sound itself. It is a shame to waste this quality.

As any other category of perceptive material, sonic matter per se has its own phenomenological realm. It can obviously be used to be attached, combined, mixed, associated, merged with other kinds of perceptive and conceptual material, even to the point of getting reinforced synergistic 'combinations'. But the more we do this, the more we weaken and diminish its own substance. And this is a powerful substance. It's not 'sound for the sake of sound'. I do not defend sonic matter as an aesthetic or conceptual category, but as a gate to different worlds of perception, experience and creation. Sound is a fiercely powerful medium, in the original sense. This raw primordial quality is easily lost in the mud of contemplation.

That's why I always do all my live shows in complete darkness. Even after having all the lights off and all the doors and windows blocked for external light, the only way to really attain this (emergency exit signs, LED lights from the equipment, etc. become as present as stars in the night) is by providing blindfolds for the audience. I use a variable surround multi-channel system of speakers around the audience, who are either sitting or laying down on the floor, facing outwards from the center, where I set up my gear in as small a spot as possible. Whenever I can, I even

additionally cover my equipment and myself by means of a tent-like structure, so the music-making is absolutely hidden for the audience when they're entering or leaving the room. All this is done with relatively simple, and widely available, technical means. Something that can be easily set up in most spaces, as far as they are not stagnant with their stereotyped stage-based performance set up, as happens in many rock clubs and concert halls.

What I struggle for with this arrangement is not an extravaganza, or a theatrical instance, but a natural consequence of an intense dedication to sonic matter as medium. I've done this kind of set up in hundreds of shows all over the world. The proportion of people from the audience that felt it as a rich, transformative experience, with ungraspable specific content but imbued with the strongest presence and power of sound, is overwhelmingly high. Not that I'm aiming at doing something popular, but I can feel I'm tapping some of the universal powers of sonic matter in an intensified way. I actually feel that most of these powers are out of my control. And that's a truly fascinating path. I personally feel transformed by the experience in the live shows. There I enter a world I cannot reach in any other way I know of. This is my main and best reason for doing live shows.

Visual darkness lights up regions of the mindscape and the spirit that are normally dormant and darkened by visual light. The ear not only hears but also decisively influences our spatio-temporal perceptions. The combination of visual darkness and being 'inside' the sound (instead of listening to it) creates a strong feeling of immersion where your own body moves into the perceptive background. As a live operator I want to become as audible as possible (which doesn't mean being loud) and as operationally invisible as possible. Disappearing as performer, felt present as medium operator, felt as such in the sound.

The real dis-apparition of the stage, in all its manifestations, and the consequent intensification of the possibilities of sound as an absolute entity, would be a breakthrough for a new experience of music. I know there will always be stages, and that's fine for many endeavours, but it can also be the destruction of some others. There are other possible worlds; don't let them get stuck and dissipated in the same, single, universal, omnipresent contemplation paradigm. With sound we can do much better than that.

References:

[not specifically mentioned in the text, and not directly inspiring either, but certainly of interest for further reading]

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