

"Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative"

- as presented by John Oswald to the Wired Society Electro-Acoustic Conference in Toronto in 1985.

Excerpts

The Commerce of Noise

The precarious commodity in music today is no longer the tune. A fan can recognize a hit from a ten millisecond burst, faster than a Fairlight can whistle Dixie. Notes with their rhythm and pitch values are trivial components in the corporate harmonization of cacophony. Few pop musicians can read music with any facility. The Art of Noise, a studio based, mass market targeted recording firm, strings atonal arrays of timbres on the line of an ubiquitous beat. The Emulator fills the bill. Singers with original material aren't studying Bruce Springsteen's melodic contours, they're trying to sound just like him. And sonic impersonation is quite legal. While performing rights organizations continue to farm for proceeds for tunesters and poeticians, those who are shaping the way the buck says the music should be, rhythmatis, timbralists and mixologists under various monikers, have rarely been given compositional credit.^{i[1]}

At what some would like to consider the opposite end of the field, among academics and the salaried technicians of the orchestral swarms, an orderly display of fermatas and hemidemisemiquavers on a page is still often thought indispensable to a definition of music, even though some earnest composers rarely if ever peck these things out anymore. Of course, if appearances are necessary, a computer program and printer can do it for them.

Musical language has an extensive repertoire of punctuation devices but nothing equivalent to literature's " " quotation marks. Jazz musicians do not wiggle two fingers of each hand in the air, as lecturers often do, when cross referencing during their extemporizations, because on most instruments this would present some technical difficulties - plummeting trumpets and such.

Without a quotation system, well-intended correspondences cannot be distinguished from plagiarism and fraud. But anyway, the quoting of notes is but a small and insignificant portion of common appropriation.

Am I underestimating the value of melody writing? Well, I expect that before long we'll have marketable expert tune writing software which will be able to generate the banalities of catchy permutations of the diatonic scale in endless arrays of tuneable tunes, from which a not necessarily affluent songwriter can choose; with perhaps a built-in checking lexicon of used-up tunes which would advise Beatle George^{ii[2]} not to make the same blunder again.

Starting from scratch

Just as sound producing and sound reproducing technology becomes more interactive, listeners are once again, if not invited, nonetheless encroaching upon creative territory. This prerogative has been largely forgotten in recent decades. The now primitive record-playing generation was a passive lot (indigenous active form scratch belongs to the post-disc, blaster/walkman era). Gone were the days of lively renditions on the parlor piano.

Computers can take the expertise out of amateur music making. A current music-minus-one program retards tempos and searches for the most ubiquitous chords to support the wanderings of a novice player. Some audio equipment geared for the consumer inadvertently offers interactive possibilities. But manufacturers have discouraged compatibility between their amateur and pro equipment. Passivity is still the dominant demographic. Thus the atrophied microphone inputs which have now all but disappeared from premium stereo cassette decks.

As a listener my own preference is the option to experiment. My listening system has a mixer instead of a receiver, an infinitely variable speed turntable, filters, reverse capability, and a pair of ears.

An active listener might speed up a piece of music in order to perceive more clearly its macrostructure, or slow it down to hear articulation and detail more precisely. Portions of pieces are juxtaposed for comparison or played simultaneously, tracing "the motifs of the Indian raga Darbar over Senegalese drumming recording in Paris and a background mosaic of frozen moments from an exotic Hollywood orchestration of the 1950's (a sonic texture like a "Mona Lisa" which in close-up, reveals itself to be made up of tiny reproductions of the Taj Mahal."^{iii[3]}

During World War II concurrent with Cage's re-establishing the percussive status of the piano, Trinidadians were discovering that discarded oil barrels could be cheap, available alternatives to their traditional percussion instruments which were, because of the socially invigorating potential, banned. The steel drum eventually became a national asset. Meanwhile, back in the States, for perhaps similar reasons, scratch and dub have, in the Eighties, percolated through the black American ghettos. Within an environmentally imposed, limited repertoire of possessions a portable disco may have a folk music potential exceeding that of the guitar. Pawned and ripped-off electronics are usually not accompanied by user's guides with consumer warnings such as "this blaster is a passive reproducer". Any performance potential found in an appliance is often exploited. A record can be played like an electronic washboard. Radio and disco jockeys layer the sounds of several recordings simultaneously. The sound of music conveyed with a new authority over the airwaves is dubbed, embellished and manipulated in kind.

The medium is magnetic

Piracy or plagiarism of a work occur, according to Milton, "if it is not bettered by the borrower". Stravinsky added the right of possession to Milton's distinction when he said, "A good composer does not imitate; he steals." An example of this better borrowing is Jim Tenney's "Collage 1" (1961) in which Elvis Presley's hit record "Blue Suede Shoes"

(itself borrowed from Carl Perkins) is transformed by means of multi-speed tape recorders and razorblade. In the same way that Pierre Schaeffer found musical potential in his object sonore, which could be, for instance, a footstep, heavy with associations, Tenney took an everyday music and allowed us to hear it differently. At the same time, all that was inherently Elvis radically influenced our perception of Jim's piece.

Fair use and fair dealing are respectively the American and the Canadian terms for instances in which appropriation without permission might be considered legal. Quoting extracts of music for pedagogical, illustrative and critical purposes have been upheld as legal fair use. So has borrowing for the purpose of parody. Fair dealing assumes use which does not interfere with the economic viability of the initial work.

The buzzing of a titanic bumblebee

The property metaphor used to illustrate an artist's rights is difficult to pursue through publication and mass dissemination. The hit parade promenades the aural floats of pop on public display, and as curious tourists should we not be able to take our own snapshots through the crowd ("tiny reproductions of the Taj Mahal") rather than be restricted to the official souvenir postcards and programmes?

All popular music (and all folk music, by definition), essentially, if not legally, exists in a public domain. Listening to pop music isn't a matter of choice. Asked for or not, we're bombarded by it. In its most insidious state, filtered to an incessant bass-line, it seeps through apartment walls and out of the heads of walk people. Although people in general are making more noise than ever before, fewer people are making more of the total noise; specifically, in music, those with megawatt PA's, triple platinum sales, and heavy rotation. Difficult to ignore, pointlessly redundant to imitate, how does one not become a passive recipient?

For a complete copy of Oswald's essay go to
<http://www.plunderphonics.com/xhtml/xplunder.html>

NOTES

^{i[1]} Unlike the more traditional vehicles of creative expression such as writing, drama, or art, the new media of the twentieth century--records, films, broadcasts, computers--often require more equipment and a large and diversified creative team. Creation is no longer a craft but also an industry. This change not only involves new forms of economic organization, but reaches into the creative process itself. For example, in a sound

recording the creative aspects include the choice of works, the contribution of musicians and performers, the work of sound mixers, and so on. Here the contribution of each team member is distinct but not separable from the final product; the outcome is greater than the sum of its parts. (A Charter of Rights for Creators, p. 13.)

^{ii[2]} The Beatles, especially Harrison, are an interesting case of reciprocity between fair use and the amassing of possession and wealth. "We were the biggest nickers in town; plagiarists extraordinaire," says Paul McCartney (Musician, Feb. 1985, p. 62). He owns one of the world's most expensive song catalogs, including a couple of state anthems. John Lennon incorporated collage techniques onto pieces like "Revolution 9," which contains dozens of looped, unauthorized fragments taped from radio and television broadcasts. George obviously wasn't "subconsciously" plagiarizing in the case of his LP *Electronic Sound*. This release consisted of nothing more than a tape of a demonstration electronic musician Bernie Krause had given Harrison on the then-new Moog synthesizer. Krause: "I asked him if he thought it was fair that I wasn't asked to share in the disc's credits and royalties. His answer was to trust him, that I shouldn't come on like Marlon Brando, that his name alone on the album would do my career good, and that if the album sold, he would give me `a couple of quid.'" The record was released with George's name in big letters, while Krause's was obscured.

^{iii[3]} Quoted from Jon Hassell's essay "Magic Realism." The passage refers in an evocative way to some appropriations and transformations in Hassell's recordings. In some cases this type of use obscures the identity of the original, and at other times the sources are recognizable.