

Musical OOPArts: early emergences of timbral objects

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Introduction

In his article 'Tempus ex Machina...', composer Gérard Grisey discusses a number of examples in classical music, where the traditional flow of time is interrupted to explore timbre. I present and analyze further examples, including cases which are not characterized by 'temporal suspensions', but other parameters relevant for generating timbre. Then, I introduce the notion Musical OOPArt in order to organize evidence that shows a progressive focalization on timbre during the romantic period and its impact in the development of future spectral and timbre-based musical styles.

Method

This research was conducted by listening and analyzing musical examples (recordings and scores) from the classical, romantic, and early modern repertoire, forming a collection of timbral-relevant objects to investigate.

Results

I expect to show how a progressive interest in timbre accentuated during the romantic period and lead to the development of spectral music and other timbre-based aesthetics.

Discussion

Starting Point

The spectral movement, which took sound as a self-referential model, has been identified for its key developments in the domains of harmony, texture, and timbre, and has had a significant impact on a variety of contemporary musical styles. Previous examples to the timbral music from the seventies, emphasizing timbre over conventional musical parameters associated to a traditional syntax such as melody, rhythm, and formulaic structures, are found in the compositions of G. Ligeti, G. Scelsi, O. Messiaen, and others. Even earlier examples can be observed within the classical and romantic periods. In the article 'Tempus ex Machina...', Gérard Grisey provides us with some notable examples from W. A. Mozart (Symphony No 40, 1st movement, bars: 58-62; 241-245), J. Brahms (Piano Concerto No 2, 1st movement, bars: 238-244; 245-260), A. Bruckner (Symphony No 9, 1st movement, bars 539-549, and 3rd movement, bars 21-29; 121-129), and R. Wagner (Das Rheingold, Beginning of the Prelude), where the standard musical development is temporarily suspended and replaced by iterations or extreme prolongations of sonic material, which produce a focus on the vertical axis of sound, almost as if composers were attempting to scrutiny the musical fabric through a microscope, although only momentarily.

One can understand timbre in two ways: as local color (micro time) or as overall color (like the characteristic sound of a rock band). The first relates to immediate perception, and the second to memory. Both approaches are relevant for timbre-centered music, but as I will show later, there are other aspects than time to consider.

Not Just Time

Additional examples in the same vein explored by Grisey are found in works by L. V. Beethoven (Symphony No 6, 2nd movement 'Nachtigall', eleven bars before the end of the movement, where time is suspended due to a *senza tempo* bird-like gesture. There is also a break in the linear narrative of Symphony No 9 with what seems to be an early example of a musical loop, thirteen bars before the end).

Something similar happens with a passage of F. Liszt in the Three Concert Études, ‘Un Sospiro’ (bars 46-51 ‘*leggierissimo volante*’), which presages the circular obsessiveness of Vortex Temporum.

In the precedent examples the ‘temporal suspensions’ (Grisey, 1987) allow to focus on the quality of sound, however I found several other passages in the musical literature, which are especially relevant from a timbral perspective, and that are related to other aspects distinct from the flow of time, including elements such as harmony, texture, gesture, tone color, and space. I will come back to this point later.

Musical OOPArts

To continue digging into notable musical peculiarities from the past, I would like to introduce the notion of Musical OPPArt. OOPArts or ‘out of place artifacts’ are archeological and puzzling, presumably human-made objects, which do not belong to the time period where found. For instance, there is an OPPArt called the ‘Antikythera Mechanism’ (an archaic form of analog computer created in Greece around 100 BCE), which forced to re-consider the estimated degree of advancement of the civilization where it was discovered.

In the case of music, when we encounter Musical OOPArts, we have to reconsider historical assumptions and the place of timbre in music from the past. While most of the archeological objects have been discredited or proved hoaxes by researchers, I find the concept useful in music to describe intriguing sound objects which question conventional narratives of the linearity of history and of musical progress, particularly in relation to timbre, showing that certain musical situations were pushing, perhaps always but more and more frequently since the romantic period, towards a new notion of time, texture, and timbre. Musical OOPArts are non-motivic or thematic materials. Marilyn Nonken argues that composers like Brahms and Liszt explored and revitalized neutral (non-melodic or thematically relevant) materials (Nonken, 2014), which transitioned from being mere connectors or accompaniment to become foreground. Precisely some of those innocuous or isolated musical materials have the potential to become Musical OOPArts, breaking the traditional musical syntax to open timbral explorations.

I would like to stress that these contextual anomalies are in fact that: unique events. In precedent centuries to the 20th, the timbral-textural-non-developmental objects appeared more as an exception than a rule, and apparently composers just let them occur, with no attempt to capture or routinize them. In fact, they usually come unexpectedly and leave inadvertently, followed by some conventional melodic formula perhaps dictated by the *status quo* of their time, although for contemporary listeners they strike as meaningful, discarding the possibility of being purely ornamental or digressional.

Types of Musical OOPArts

In the following lines, I offer some examples of Musical OOPArts, sketching a taxonomy of their types. I should first warn that this classification is an exercise and that some elements that I will discuss could easily fit into more than one category due to the holistic nature of timbre.

1st Musical OOPArt (rhythm).

This is the previously examined type, including the examples by G. Grisey where temporal suspensions direct the attention of the listener to immediate color, anticipating timbral-based music.

2nd Musical OOPArt (harmony).

Perhaps the most obvious parameter moving from the tonal-system era to what could be called the century of timbre (the 20th and beginning of the 21st) is harmony. Harmony in relation to timbre is important because, as Tristan Murail states, these two elements work as a continuum (Murail, 2005). Harmony understood as a collection of frequencies plays a key role in defining the overall color of a sound, not just from a pitch perspective, but impacting more nuanced perceptual qualities such as brightness or mellowness, and even creating emotional associations. For instance, harmony can make us consider a sound as aggressive, sweet or mysterious. In the 3rd movement of Beethoven’s Waldstein Sonata (bars 255-256; 261-262; 267-268) there is a harmonic progression in which three chords call my attention. The three suspects are harmless dominant 7th chords, although colored with sharp 9^{ths} (C7[#9], F7[#9], Bb7[#9]).

To my jazzy ears, we are transported all of a sudden to the world of Jimmy Hendrix, Funk, and Fusion Music. Even if in the context of Beethoven these oddities are only expressive additions, they are opening the door to working with harmony as color and paving the way to what will come later with C. Debussy, A. Scriabin, and others.

3rd Musical OOPArt (texture).

Musical texture can be defined by the number of layers and the hierarchies or relationships between the component sounds. According to Panayiotis Kokoras, the paradigmatic texture of our time is what he calls *holophony*, which is a combination or synthesis of different sounds into a whole (Kokoras, 2007). The emergence of this kind of texture is partly explained by the development of electroacoustic music where the traditional categories of texture (monophony, polyphony, homophony) are replaced by open and mixed textures, resulting in a continuum of sound. If we listen to the opening (bars 1-2) of the 6th movement of G. Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* 'Der Abschied', we encounter a musical material that cannot be classified under the traditional textural types. It is really a sound object, which could have time-traveled from the middle of the 20th century to create this introductory atmosphere that is not melody, neither harmony nor any other conventional musical constituent. By building a refined orchestration, Mahler is anticipating the notion of 'composing the sound itself' (Bauer, 2001) instead of composing with a predetermined palette of sounds. As usual with Musical OOPArts, this anomalous moment is quickly abandoned, and then it turns into a conventional —fragmented however— accompanied melody.

4th Musical OOPArt (gesture).

Gesture is perhaps one of the most recent interests of musical scrutiny (along with timbre). Musical gestures are linked with physical actions literally or figuratively. Considering gesture in its metaphorical aspect, that is as a musical material characterized by active movement, I would like to concentrate on three examples from R. Strauss. Two of them appear in the *Alpine Symphony*. The first is found three bars before rehearsal number 43 and marked 'At the Waterfall'. Extremely fast descending note-streams not only effectively achieve the association with a cascade, but also surprise because of the novelty of the gesture and the brightness of the orchestration. Since the music is fast, it leaves a memorable sound signature, thus gesture becomes timbre. Here, Strauss anticipates the material of page 31 in Grisey's *Partiels*. At rehearsal number 43 'Apparitions' the same material of the precedent waterfall gesture is stretched and its energy de-radicalized to transform the material into a stable texture, which preserves the overall timbre. In rehearsal number 5 of *Josephslegende*, we find a violin gesture which displays physical action, and also stands out for its originality as sonic substance. The virtuosity here is not related to the craft of N. Paganini, but more directly to the one of S. Sciarrino. Although the passage requires a mastery level of the instrument, it seems more a virtuosity of sound than acrobatics of the hands.

In bars 106-110 of B. Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* (one of his latest works) one can appreciate a music that breaks the linearity of narrative to focus on 'a single body of sound' (Johnsons 2015). Here the gesture is stretched to become texture, one that does not progress, but that is self-referential, announcing some of the sonorities of the music from the seventies. Bartók is perhaps the 'missing link' between late romanticism, and timbre-based music of the 20th and 21st centuries —probably even more than I. Stravinsky and A. Schönberg were, and whose rivalry seems more related to the music of the first half of the 20th century.

5th Musical OOPArt (tone color).

It may seem tautological to discuss a timbre-defining object in terms of its tone color, but I wish to refer to a very specific case, which is when special attention is given for creating a new sound in a more deliberate way. There are several examples in the literature when sound is altered to produce an 'effect', but there are cases where an effect acquires transcendence. If we pay attention to bars 84-85 of R. Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, 'Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla' we will encounter sound blocks, which could perfectly belong to a passage orchestrated by O. Messiaen, who would later introduce the notion of 'harmonic-timbral complex'. This example is specially interesting since we have a reference in the same movement to compare to. Bars 84-85 are a sort of zoom-in or distorted version of the precedent bars 68-

69, which are indeed more conventional in their sonority. It seems that Wagner is opening the possibility of incorporating timbre as a procedure for musical development.

Another example of utilizing color to create an evocative passage appears in the Rite of Spring (last bar of 'The Sage'), where Stravinsky only needs two seconds to capture our attention and transports us into the domain of the most adventurous works of G. Ligeti.

The previously mentioned example of Mahler could fit into this type of Musical OOPArt as well, although since it is an object which expands time itself, I consider it more related to textural development than to immediate color.

6th Musical OOPArt (space).

The final type of Musical OOPArt I have reflected upon carries us into a more distant past than the romantic era. Longtime before the days of amplification, effect-pedals, and recording studio techniques—and the later assimilation of these resources by purely acoustic music, which mimics delay, chorus or reverb effects—, spatial considerations were relevant. Space dramatically affects timbre (in the micro and the macro levels). Take for instance bars 10-15 of G. Gabrieli's Canzon in Echo a 10. The written echo effects—and panning effects if performed in two opposing choruses—in addition to the resonances of an enclosed space, provide the brass instruments with a timbre completely different to the one achieved in open spaces. By writing echoes in the score, Gabrieli enhances an acoustic phenomenon, and in this way becomes one of the precursors of turning form and material into one thing. One could also discuss the associated practice of stereophonic choruses, no doubt a visionary Out of Place Practice or 'OOPPra'...

Conclusions

Several taxonomies of sound objects or musical types have been attempted since Pierre Schaffer. I am particularly attracted to the thoughts of Helmut Lachenmann on this respect (Lachenmann, 1970) and to the more experimental approach proposed by Xavier Hautbois with *Les UST* (Temporal Semiotic Units) (Frey et al., 2014). These new systems of classification have emerged as a necessity to organize contemporary musical entities, which do not conform to traditional grammars of music, and that are heavily structured on timbre. Some of these sonic entities, born long ago but described only in recent decades, have existed as 'out of time' musical fragments in precedent centuries, perhaps ignored '*objets à découvrir*' of their days, which acted as windows to the music of the future. The Musical OOPArts previously discussed are a testimony of the weirdness of history, and perhaps the ubiquity of certain musical aspects beyond time. They also suggest the possibility that being attuned to current singularities (contemporary Musical OOPArts) could influence, in a more conscious manner, the music to become.

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