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# Dwelling and the Sacralisation of the Air: A note on acousmatic music

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**This paper adapts Martin Heidegger's philosophy of 'dwelling' in order to effect a liaison between acousmatic music and ecological concern. I propose this as an alternative to both the propagandist use of music as a means of protest and to using the science of ecology as a domain that might furnish new compositional means. I advance the interpretation that acousmatic music 'occupies the air' in ways that transform the meaning of that dimension. It allows the sky to be sky and the earth, earth. I use the precedent of bell ringing as an example of sonic activity that occupies the air in order to further dwelling.**

In this paper I develop a response to certain questions raised in this journal concerning the relationship between musical practice and the ecosystem. I believe that, from a musicological and critical point of view, broaching a discourse that thinks music and the environment together is timely and advantageous, and, I might add, such a discourse can readily be accommodated in the recently consolidated branch of interdisciplinary humanities research known as 'ecocriticism'. Ecocriticism sets an urgent issue before us: the canon of liberal political concerns – class, race, gender, sexuality and imperialism – can be augmented by a concern for the *environment*. Like queer, feminist, critical and postcolonial theory, ecocriticism analyses cultural documents as betraying and concealing implicit values and ideologies that condition our attitudes to the natural environment. In doing this, like other theoretically and politically motivated critiques, ecocriticism mobilises genuine pragmatic sympathies and commitments.

'Green values', as we now might call them, are on the point of becoming absolutes. Just as we would expect no right-thinking person to accept sexual discrimination, slavery, warmongering or racial prejudice – to a large extent social and political discourse is predicated upon identifying and challenging injustice – indifference towards the fate of the planet, the natural environment, species diversity, pollution, global warming and so forth cannot now be tolerated. Because, as is acknowledged now in law, the environment is an international matter; green values have a geopolitical universality which other concerns, relativised by local cultural and political contexts, will never have. As such,

green values are arguably the most powerful means we have of challenging the only other global value system we acknowledge, capitalism.

A few months before the time of writing, in October 2010, millions of gallons of toxic ferrous sulphate leaked from an aluminum processing plant in Hungary. Televised scenes of streets turned blood red by chemical pollutant provide a graphic depiction of the sheer scale and strangeness of the impact made on the landscape by industrial activity. These kinds of ecological disaster inspire shock and anger, and seem to *reveal* to us the awful nature of capitalist industrialisation and expansion (also called growth) as at times irrational, rapacious and highly irresponsible. But equally we are – apparently – dependent upon these very same industries for maintaining our high standard of living, for jobs, goods, transport and materials. The leftist would also point out that occupying this contradiction – which we all must do – requires an ideology that might very well flatter some environmentalist concerns. Parading a few inoffensive green values and compassion towards our fellow creatures might offset the nascent guilt of middle-class over-consumers and opining celebrities, but it does so without ever really addressing more fundamental questions.

I raise these issues because it seems to me that a response in music to environmental concern, if it were to adopt a protesting or propagandising tone, would not in anyway elude the ideological entrapments occasioned by late-capitalist consumption: music could lapse into functioning as a rather effete psychological compensation for what are daunting problems. Even if such a response were made, from an expressive point of view, which is very easy to neglect, one cannot imagine any kind of musically wrought statement that would be proportionate or appropriate to the crisis at hand.<sup>1</sup> In any case, such an attempt would be immediately superfluous, given the ease and speed with which the media represents, sentimentalises or makes a spectacle of ecological disaster. An alternative response might treat the environmental sciences, biology and the science of

<sup>1</sup>If, as the Adornoian slogan runs, poetry after Auschwitz is barbarism, one might also say that it is *impossible*.

ecosystem as yet another resource – or ‘standing reserve’<sup>2</sup> – from which to extract interesting technical-productive possibilities. Just as fractals, Markov chains, set theory and recursive algorithms have enjoyed their days in the sun as compositional means, perhaps a new family of suggestive metaphors or processes could be extracted from the ecosystem? However, the cynical voluntarism that such a posture implies is obviously part of the problem: are we destined only to ever consider the world as a resource from which we can fund our projects?

Another response in music to environmental concern can be taken. In what I propose many will recognise clear sympathies with field of acoustic ecology. In a deep sense, I am attempting to discover a poetic imperative to musical composition (and, for that matter, scholarship) that is derived from a changed perception of the living environment. I am concerned, in other words, with *ecopoiesis*,<sup>3</sup> not ecocriticism, and not with deriving any praxial or technical directives for composition from the domain of theory. I will take up the thinking of Martin Heidegger and suggest that the development of the notion of *dwelling* will open out a space in thought in which another relationship of musical sound and the environment can be revealed. My argument has three stages: firstly, I adopt Heidegger’s notion of the fourfold,<sup>4</sup> a broad, highly speculative construct which defines the nature of human existence (or *Dasein*).<sup>5</sup> The fourfold consists of the coming together of four distinct realms of Being: the Earth, the Sky, the Divinities and Mortals.

Secondly, I will explore the notion of dwelling, which implies tarrying, staying in place, a locale. This produces a further sense that is directly pertinent to the environment, that of taking care, of vouchsafing our place on the earth, of making it habitable, safe and thereby allowing it, and us, to flourish.<sup>6</sup> Sound contributes to this sense of making a space secure, or

<sup>2</sup>This is a term that is deployed in Heidegger’s essay ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ (see Heidegger 1993: 322–3). It describes taking a stance with respect to the environment which takes the latter as being only a resource, as being docile in respect of human purposes.

<sup>3</sup>The neologism ‘ecopoiesis’ I take from Kate Rigby’s article ‘Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis’ (2004).

<sup>4</sup>The usual translation of *das Geviert*. The ‘quadrate’ is also adequate.

<sup>5</sup>The German word ‘Dasein’ – literally ‘being there’ – marks out Heidegger’s philosophical approach to understanding human existence. The being of the Human Being is accorded special treatment by Heidegger: humans are not things amongst things (the usual philosophical exemplum of this is the hammer), rather their being is characterized by, for example, orientating themselves towards making use of things and make a future for themselves, and in taking care of the things that are present with a view to them having a future.

<sup>6</sup>I should point out that the Human has a special role in vouchsafing the earth. By way of comparison, one could consider the option proposed by the ‘Voluntary Human Extinction Movement’ that humanity should engineer its dying out thus leaving the planet free of our menacing and destructive presence.

*hallowed*, and historically sound has been used to announce and ward off perceived danger. I will refer to Alain Corbin’s campanarian history *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth Century French Countryside* (1998) by way of illustration.

Finally, I will propose that sound can – and I think acousmatic music, despite its apparent technoscientific trappings, can do this extremely elegantly – enchant the air. I would go so far as to say that sound can, briefly and in an attenuated manner, make the sky sacred<sup>7</sup> and, in doing so, appeals to Man (*Dasein*) to make ready, abide and wait. I will risk the formulation that the continual attraction of acousmatic composition, for good or ill, is that it enchants.

## 1. DWELLING

Heidegger’s definition of ‘dwelling’ is simple, it is ‘the manner in which mortals are on the earth’ (2001: 146). We build, we make spaces and invest in them, endow them with life and meaning, because our nature is to dwell. In Scottish English, one asks ‘where do you stay?’ meaning where do you live or reside? (South of the border, one says ‘where do you live?’) Staying has a breadth of significance that is easily lost: a temporal aspect is disclosed in the word. To *stay*, as in to stay one’s hand, means to hold back, to pause; it also means to tether and keep in place.

A home, for example, is not simply a physical distribution of walls and doors and rooms; it is the place that can endure for us, to which we can return, and that gives us back our energy and identity. The home where we dwell preserves us; we are (or should be) at peace there, we should be protected from harm and danger. It also, in Heidegger’s derivation, *s pares* us. To ‘sparing’ he gives the positive sense of ‘returning something specifically to its being’ (2001: 147).<sup>8</sup>

The Greek *οικος*, which provides the prefix ‘eco’ in economics and ecology, means home and family, the place where we dwell. And our homes *sound*. Anecdotally, the precritical re-discovering of the sonic manifestation of home is well reflected in countless student experiments in soundscape. Given recording equipment, many will immediately begin to document the telling sounds of their homes. These sounds, of course, mean nothing to the listeners who do not dwell there, and who, in these sounds, cannot

<sup>7</sup>Making sacred implies the *act* of consecration. What prevails in this consecration is making a space fitting for God (or for gods), but also one that is *holy*. The deeper sense of the holy are wholeness or health.

<sup>8</sup>‘Sparing’, in the sense of refraining from (harming) something and letting it be, is only one sense of the word. In English, ‘sparing oneself’ means providing for oneself, for one’s own needs. The idiom ‘spare a thought’, which suggests remembering, and bringing something lovingly or carefully to mind, captures Heidegger’s meaning very accurately.

feel themselves returned ‘home’.<sup>9</sup> The ‘treatment’ of these sounds as ‘material’ presents students with a huge psychological hurdle since they must overcome their personal signification in order to construct form.

Just as sound can define the *habitus*, sound can destroy it. Sound does not respect the boundaries upon which dwelling spaces depend. In terraced houses and apartment buildings, noise intrudes along echoing corridors and passes through walls, and at a stroke destroys the distinctness of any given space. Upon waking, the vile indifference of voices on radio and television interrupts my returning to myself. Even the murmurings of pipes and plumbing, central heating and ventilation – this is brilliantly exploited in the claustrophobic soundscape of David Lynch’s film *Eraserhead* – have an uncanny disregard for how dwelling spaces are constituted.

## 2. THE FOURFOLD

The doctrine of *the fourfold* in Heidegger is highly speculative and many commentators shy away from it.<sup>10</sup> However, it shadows all his thinking about art and poetry and needs in some way to be broached. It asserts that dwelling is produced by the codependency and unity of four realms: the earth, the sky, divinities and mortals. This is asserted as the primordial essence of dwelling. One cannot think about one of these realms without invoking the others, but this invocation has been suppressed or, perhaps more precisely, forgotten. As he writes in *Building Dwelling Thinking*, four times over in an incantatory refrain, ‘we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four’ (*doch wir bedenken nicht die Einfalt der Vier*) (Heidegger 2001: 147). Oneness (and one can easily hear something spiritual or theological in that word) implies connection, integration and harmony. Mortals are folded-together with other beings with their life on the earth; mortals are on the earth and depend upon the earth; the earth is laid out under the sky – the sky holds sway over diurnal and seasonal rhythms, and atmospheric conditions.

Of the four, we would in this structure perhaps have the most difficulty with the presence of divinities. But it is an ethnographic fact that human cultures to this day will bring gods into their homes or assign to gods certain responsibilities. And in Western, secular culture it is of course acceptable to acknowledge that we did once

populate our world with gods and divinities, and thinking in Heidegger’s terms merely requires us to *think back* (*andenken*). Distantly, there is in poetry, especially lyric poetry – which is near to the essence of song, chant, or enchantment – an echo or afterimage, as it were, of a manner of invocation or an appeal to intercession via dedication. In the opening of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, ‘O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend/The brightest heaven of invention’, we already hear little more than a poetic convention. However, the convention is as old as European literature itself, which appeals for divine assistance in the writing of literary composition. In Heidegger’s sense, what matters here is the sense of awaiting the presence of the divine, the hopeful, watchful aspect. Any appeal to ‘inspiration’ is a remnant of this.

Closer to our own time, when twentieth-century painting took up the representational style of African tribal art, it set about uncivilising itself (expressionism wanted to uncover an existential urgency in art) but it also thereby occasioned a re-encountering, via artistic representation, of primitive religious belief. Precisely this pattern is at work in what was to be the turning point in Picasso’s career. He came to understand his own painting as a contention with profound forces, exterior and interior. After a visit to the *Musée de l’Homme* in Paris, where he saw African mask and fetish art, Picasso related the following experience:

[A]ll those objects which men had fashioned with a sacred, magical intent, as intermediaries between them and the unknown hostile forces which surrounded them, thus attempting to overcome their terror in giving the forces colour and form ... Then I understood that this was the true meaning of painting. Painting is not an aesthetic process; it’s a form of magic which is interposed between the hostile universe and ourselves, a means of seizing power, of imposing form on our fears as on our desires. The day I understood that, I knew that I had found my way. (Greene 1993: 495)

Picasso identified the fetish as an intermediary: this is similar to Heidegger’s understanding of divinities. The religious fetish, which is man-made, nevertheless holds open a place for a spirit or a god. Projected onto these objects is the profound vulnerability of human existence in the face of a threatening environment, the desire for control through form-giving and appeasement through sacrifice. I am suggesting that something of this is present in expressionist art. There is a sense in which the ‘painting itself’, the actual materials of which it is composed and the form of the final image, do not circumscribe the entirety of what the painting *is*. For Picasso, the painting is suspended between a human order and an imagined ‘beyond’.

It is not my place to prove beyond all doubt any of these formulations. They remain suggestive. I merely try to bring closer the possibility that as we attempt to make a place for ourselves on the earth, try to find

<sup>9</sup>A sound familiar to me is the so-called ‘hurry bell’ which rings out at 8.35 from Glasgow University Chapel each morning to announce the start of services.

<sup>10</sup>Among most readers of Heidegger, no major concept has left as unfavorable an impression as *das Geviert*: the fourfold. Among those readers who were never fans of Heidegger to begin with, the effect is of course far worse, and the fourfold is simply dismissed as an example of pious gibberish. As a result, most favorable commentators leave it out of consideration altogether, with Heidegger’s friends trying to prevent him from embarrassing himself among his enemies’ (Harman 2002: 190).

our way – to dwell. We do so by attending to other mortals, to the earth and sky, but also, in a much attenuated manner, by holding out hope for what may come. Holding silence on Remembrance Sunday, or at a sporting occasion, is exactly this small interruption in profane existence.

For those interested in sound, it is that part of the fourfold which is the sky (*Himmel*) that matters. Heidegger writes: ‘Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and the moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency; they do not turn night into day nor day into a harassed unrest’ (Heidegger 2001: 148). There is a pious, prayerful tone to this writing that will embarrass and irritate many. However, the verb *lassen* captures my attention because it reflects a singular disposition, that of letting-be and non-intervention. For how can we intervene in the sky? The weather? The course of the stars? How can this be material that we can use up, spoil or control? That which is above us is beyond us, it is out of our control and we take as it is. It is salutary to be reminded that so near to us there are forces so tremendous that we can do nothing to tame them. The sky is also the province of sound, including the winds (who also used to bear the names of gods) and the loudest sound routinely known to human cultures, that of thunder. These sounds occupy the air in remarkable ways. The source of the sound is unknown or not always clear: even when lightning strikes, thunder follows at a temporal remove – the two phenomena separate in a remarkable way – and fills the sky in all directions.

### 3. THE PARISH BELL

Until recently, the only human sound that could compete with the sounds of the air was the parish bell. (The word parish also comes from *οικος*, *para-oikos*, literally beside-dwelling.) The parish is a bounded space at the centre of which is the church and the bell tower. The campanarian historian Alain Corbain in his extraordinary book *Les cloches de la terre*, has set out the complex range of meanings of the sound of bells in nineteenth-century France. The bell had a territorial function; it organised the working day, it raised alarm and preserved the community. It ‘anchored localism, imparting depth to the desire for rootedness and offering the peace of near, well-defined horizons’ (Corbain 1998: 97). Corbain continues:

In the nineteenth century, at least in the countryside, bell ringing defined a space with which only fragmented, discontinuous noises were heard, none of which could really vie with the bell tower. After all there were as yet no airplanes, which nowadays are capable of competing with, overwhelming and, above all, neutralizing the sound of bells. Aerial sounds have been desecralised.

Since the dawn of the twentieth century, bell and cannon have ceased to be the sole rivals of the mighty thunderbolt. (Corbain 1998: 97)

The preserving – sacred – function of the parish bell is shot through with remnants of superstition. Demons were thought to occupy the air (and so bring disease, storms, plagues of insects and untimely frosts). But demons were supposed to be ‘horrified by the sound of bells’ (Corbain 1998: 101). Bells summoned angels and cleared a path to heaven for prayer. In the eighteenth century, belief in the saving power of bells was widespread in rural areas. Naturally, this ran into conflict with Enlightenment rationalism and educated opinion, and the tension between the new and the old continued for the best part of a century. During thunderstorms, parishioners rang the church bells in shifts. If you were unable to attend, you were required to pay a deputy (see Corbain 1998: 103). In 1772 the Bishop of Metz issued a ban on ringing ‘during thunderstorms and springtime frosts’ but this drew furious protests (Corbain 1998: 103). Even though the practice of ringing at a storm was all but gone by the mid-nineteenth century, between the 1860s and 1880s bells were still cast marked with inscriptions such as *pestem fugo* (I drive away pestilence), *nimbus fugo* (I drive away storms) and *daemones fugo* (I drive away demons).

The church bell was humanity’s only means of influence in commerce with the sky. The sky conveyed prayers to heaven, and housed demons and angels. As such, the meaning of the church bell is grasped in a remarkable way by the fourfold of which Heidegger writes: the sounding bell delineates territory, space and sites upon the earth; it brings mortals together; it occupies the skies and calls out to, or repels, divinities.

### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The entanglement of art with myth has been a constant feature of the most sophisticated philosophical thought of the twentieth century. As Adorno (Heidegger’s fiercest opponent) argued, art never quite breaks free of its historical connection to pre-Enlightenment belief since it is a human, material, technical practice. The tortuous, dialectic interplay of his *Aesthetic Theory* always compulsively entwines the definable and technical with speculative concepts such as enigma, apparition, the *Irrlicht* and *Geist*.

Cultural secularisation does not sign off all gods as dead. Rather, it constructs a society where fetishism, polytheism, monotheism and rationalist atheism sit alongside one another in a strange uncomprehending indifference or tolerance. There is no more spectacular example of the odd confusion of different orders of belief than the strange persistence of the Christmas festival. Nothing is so baffling as Christmas: part pagan, part Christian, part communitarian, part Victorian ideology, part consumerist frenzy.

Liberal, secular society does not stand to gain by eliminating either theistic belief or superstition (besides, these are protected by the human rights legislation) and it does not demonstrate any particular militancy in confronting religions, except when local interpretations and practices, such as the wearing of the burka, run counter to more strongly held political ideology. This is in contrast to the struggle we have already considered between French peasantry and the urban theocracy over the protecting power of parish bells. At stake was actually a worldview, with modern monotheism attempting to subdue less advanced polytheistic superstitions. Today, religious opinion has no particular authority; we might well find such practices perfectly harmless and even rather charming.

It would be easy enough to treat Heidegger's thought as yet another example of a quaint – but nonsensical – philosophical hangover, one theory amongst a panoply of New Age garbage. However, the principle lesson I take from Heidegger is that thinking (this includes philosophy and poetry and music) must de-banalise the word and the world. Much religion and new age religiosity fails to do this. But I admit, even then, that I have been evasive and uncritical in this paper: I have not subjected Heidegger's writing to the normal counter-positional challenging and resolution that typifies a properly worked-through argument. I confess that at some stage in preparing this paper I abandoned the hope that the doctrine of the fourfold was defensible at any level.

Ecocriticism occasions a new departure for aesthetic thinking. Ecological crisis forces us to address how we live and how we use the earth, and it is possible to recognise that the aesthetic prefigures the qualitative transformation of the relationship between man and the environment. We can start to be mindful of the fact that sound is, on occasion, something that is above us, is of the sky, and that, on occasion, certain sounds have split from their origin or have no perceivable origin. The dialectic of my argument is that acousmatic music, despite its technical advancement, communicates readily with myth. Acousmatic music belongs to the air more radically than other musical genres. Something in it responds to a need for vastness, resonance, scale and anonymity. An ungrounded sound, a sound without source or body, a sound that thickens the air and fashions impossible resonant spaces, and even, through sheer volume and impact encroaches on places of fear in us, will inevitably cause the air to be sacralised.<sup>11</sup> The consequence of this – and this is a poetic, imaginative logic – is that briefly *being on the earth* is qualitatively transformed.

<sup>11</sup>At the very least, I hope that my paper has persuaded readers that, in terms of spatialisation, the vertical should be treated as another dimension, as another compositional parameter; what is above us is another domain altogether.

I am by no means advocating a return to superstition, or a new parochialism. The sentimental trappings of the religious and the ecological alike spell disaster: there is nothing more banal than sentiment. What I am arguing here is that in the case of art we are confronted with artefacts that are only ever partly expunged of their mythical heritage. A mythical discourse is never imposed upon art; it is repressed, harried, denied or etiolated. The question for aesthetic theory is how to render this trace, how to think it. Thinking must go ever more deeply into what is given in the historical fact of art.

Further to this, another problem comes into focus. Have the humanities, without realising it perhaps, succumbed to the fetish of growth; have they institutionally and procedurally committed themselves to obscene critical over-production? To adapt a phrase coined by the Australian political theorist Clive Hamilton, have the humanities used up time they don't have to produce interpretations they don't need in order to impress people they don't like?<sup>12</sup> I permit myself to imagine that one of the outcomes of ecocriticism is to promote another kind of critical practice which performatively rejects such overproduction, and that sets a poetic argument against a harassing of texts and ideas and practices to produce yet more 'knowledge'.

The arts can make a contribution to ecology by addressing themselves to the question that much of our public discourse shrewdly evades: are we preparing to change how we live upon the *Earth*? I will seize upon that word *prepare*: are we readying ourselves? Are we making ready? All the cynical remarks about the futility of art in a time of crisis can be silenced by that thought. A work of art is not something that of itself is fully actual, or fully realised. Therefore, deliberating them in terms of immediate emotional utility or technical accomplishment is facile. The artwork is a thing which is readied and which readies us; it is a thing which awaits and is open to future possibility.

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<sup>12</sup>See Hamilton 2004.