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A Portfolio of Original Compositions (Andrew Dolphin)

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4.2 Acousmatics and degrees of abstraction

Many of the fixed media works presented in the portfolio share certain aesthetic similarities in their compositional approach and sonorities. Specific concrete objects and themes are frequently explored, with shifting perspectives, degrees of abstraction, and referential uses of sound considered central structural features in many of the pieces.

Theories presented by Emmerson (1986) are particularly useful in describing some of the compositional and wider aesthetic themes investigated. Emmerson defines a continuum between aural and mimetic discourse.

Emmerson describes:

...a continuum of possibilities between two poles. At one extreme, the mimetic discourse is evidently the dominant aspect of our perception of the work; at the other, our perception remains relatively free of any directly evoked image¹²⁷

John Young expresses similar ideas.

The notion of an underlying continuum of realism and abstraction has therefore become a core source of meaning in electroacoustic music, particularly in acousmatic music...¹²⁸

It is important to note that clear unarguable positioning of a piece on the continuum Emmerson describes is sometimes problematic. Rajmil Fischman acknowledges the potential compositional value of this:

In fact, many works thrive in the regions of ambiguity of the aural–mimetic continuum.¹²⁹

Themes and features of many of the works presented can be directly related to Emmerson's theories and discussion on a continuum between the poles of aural and mimetic

¹²⁷ Emmerson (1986), pp. 19.

¹²⁸ Young (2007), pp. 25.

¹²⁹ Fischman (2008), pp.113.

discourse,¹³⁰ and this theory underpins personal aesthetic approaches to the composition of fixed media electroacoustic music. Emerson's use of the word *continuum* suggests a gradual scale which moves from each end of a perceptual spectrum, from aural to mimetic. The full length of the continuum therefore represents a variety of perceptual experiences of a work, and a wide range of related compositional techniques which play with aspects of source bonding and referential uses of sound, and the grades, or shades between the recognisable and the abstract.

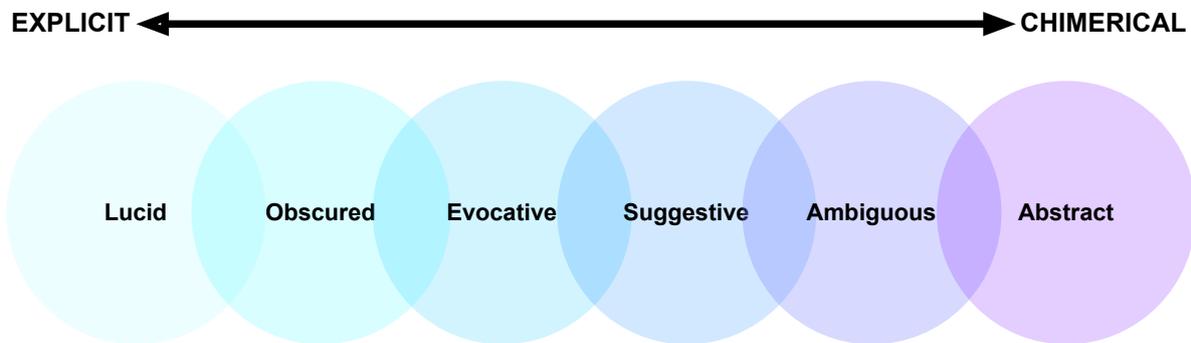


Figure 30. Degrees and Definitions of Abstraction

Personal methodologies that use Emerson's continuum as a foundation for composition inform the adaptation of his theory, which attempts to identify graduations in approach within a compositional context, and with particular reference to the possible perceptual experiences of the listener. The proposed extension of Emerson's theories uses a similar starting point in that a form of perceptual continuum exists in the model. This extends from the *explicit* to the *chimerical*. On a simplified level, *explicit* attempts to describe sound which is used in a raw, untreated and recognisable form. When materials are explicitly revealed, this relates to the far left of the model.¹³¹ The *chimerical* end of the spectrum refers to the unreal, imaginary, the wildly fanciful and highly unrealistic.

¹³⁰ Rajmil Fischman identifies two important points when considering a work within the continuum defined by Emerson. These are: "The separation into continua is only illustrative: in fact... there may be degrees of overlap and parallelism between continua." and "The use of the term 'continuum' does not necessarily imply linearity: while there are obvious advantages in representing some of the dimensions as linear, there are instances where analogies to nonlinear space are more appropriate." Fischman (2008), pp. 112-13.

¹³¹ Although it is acknowledged that a raw recording and uncoloured representation of an object, space or environment may still be perceived by the listener as being abstract.

Definitions of the levels of abstraction¹³²

Lucid

Lucid refers to a predominantly *explicit* depiction of a sound object, environment, or space that is clearly expressed, or realistically represented. Sound materials are most likely to fit this definition when they are presented in a raw form. However, it should be noted that unfamiliar sound materials may be presented in a raw form, and therefore may be best described as being perceptually closer to the *chimerical* end of the continuum. Contrasting this, a lucid definition may be attributed to an artificial and staged sound world. The use of sound in film is useful to consider here, as supposed realistic representational uses of sound may be derived from sources which may be vastly different from the visual object(s) or scene being represented.

Obscured

A sound object, sound world, environment or space in which some colouring, skewing or transformation of the source is perceivable. A source is distinct and most likely recognisable, but some aspects of its spectrum or spatial attributes are perceptually altered. An element of uncertainty is introduced, with some of the original features of the source extended or concealed. Materials may also be obscured naturally in their pure recorded form, due to the removal of context when presented solely through loudspeakers.

Evocative

Evocative could be described as being sounds capacity to conjure an impression of reality through imagination. Impressions of reality encompasses individual memories and associations that will be personal to the listener. Here we are moving into a more impressionistic domain. It could be argued that a piece's ability to be evocative is not necessarily dependent on whether the piece uses mimetic or abstract musical materials, each has its own capacity to be evocative. An evocative impression or image may mix fact with fantasy.

¹³² The distinctions and boundaries between each definition are open to interpretation.

Suggestive

Suggesting or hinting at something, this may be an object, environment or space that is implied or indicated.

Ambiguous

Sound materials or spatial features may be difficult to distinguish or classify, and may be open to a number of possible interpretations, or meanings. Source-cause relationships are indefinite, unclear and open to interpretation.

Abstract

Sound materials or spaces that are thought of as apart from concrete realities, or specific objects. Materials which have limited concrete references and are experienced without source-bonded relationships.

Developing the Model

A sound world within a single work may consist of materials which are perceived as directly referential or explicit, and ambiguous or abstract simultaneously. Different types of sound materials within a single work may therefore exist in multiple regions, or perceptual zones of a continuum. Changes in perception may also change moment by moment, with perceptual changes not necessarily directly related to the amount of studio controlled abstraction. Listeners may focus on a work as a homogenised whole, or on individual components or elements within the work, and their focus and attention on these may be different on each listen. A listener's perceptual focus may also shift throughout the experience of a single listen to a work, making the process of listening and perceiving both individual and dynamic.

Whereas the original model attempts to define different types or gradients of abstraction of a perceived whole, the model is not fully representational of the fixed media works presented in the portfolio, as it does not represent the combinatory effect of different types of materials

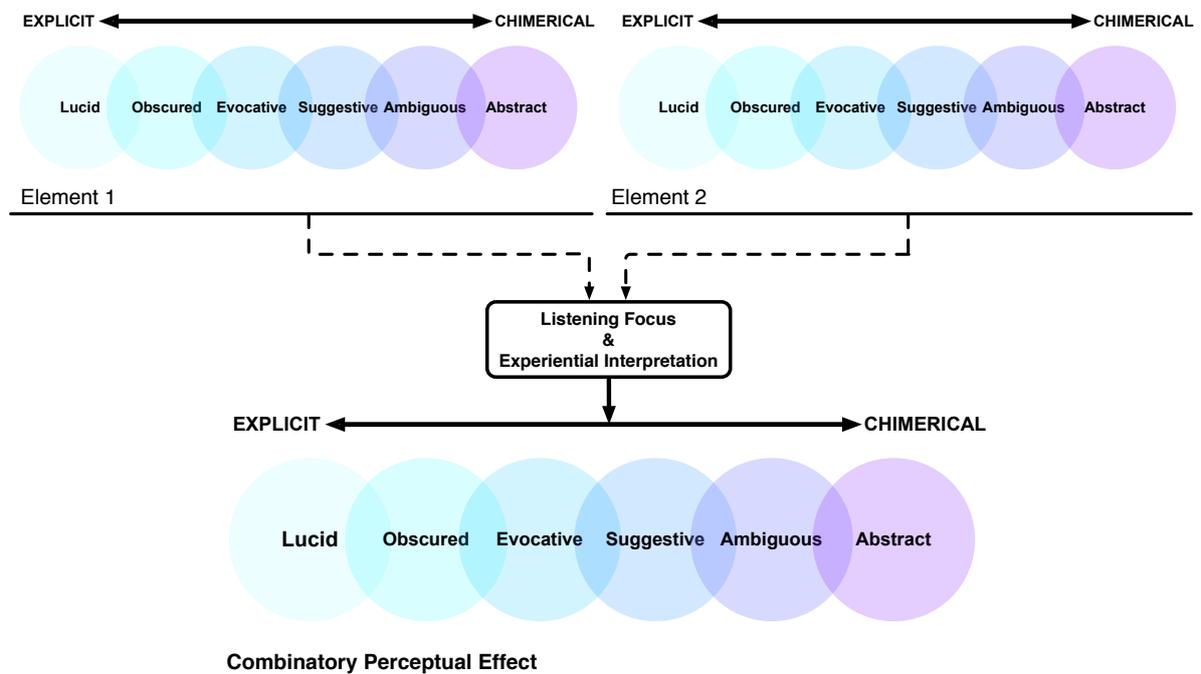


Figure 31. Degrees and Definitions of Combinatory Abstraction

that form interwoven parts or lines within a single piece.¹³³ Discussion of perceptual and aesthetic features of a multilayered composition that contains contrasting materials requires an extension of the model to reflect the results of a combinatory approach. Firstly, an overly simplified question is raised to illustrate the need for developing the model: *How is a piece considered in terms of its levels of perceptual abstraction when a raw recognisable environmental recording exists alongside a purely synthesised tone within the same piece?* Whilst the listener may perceptually separate these two elements, they coexist in the piece together and may even occur at the same point in time, one providing a context and perceptual counterpoint for the other. By introducing an alien element into a recognisable sound environment, abstraction occurs through context and contrast, creating a form of virtual extension of the sonic environment. This idea is explored in many of the fixed media works presented.

The model represented in Figure 31 could also be interpreted as being a temporal model in which each element occurs at a different point in time within a single work, changing perceptual relationships between explicit materials and derived transformed abstractions as

¹³³ Multilayered entwined sound materials are a characteristic feature of the fixed media works presented.

the structure of a piece progresses, and materials are revealed.¹³⁴ Associative structural references, and significant shifts along an abstraction continuum are explored in many of the portfolio works, and often feature as key structural devices.

Applying the Model to Musical Materials

A feature evident in works such as *Mint Cascade* and *Impure Carbon* is the introduction of abstract musical materials. These are materials that are derived from either musical instruments or synthesised sound. Abstract musical materials at times coexist alongside concrete sounds, providing a form of abstraction through context. Counterpoint between the abstract musical materials and mimetic sound is explored in these pieces.

The combinatory model presented is not just intended for concrete objects or environments, but can be applied to musical or tonal timbres, and their interrelationships with resonant elements of abstracted environments or sound objects. In the model, musical or tonal sounds are not necessarily intended to be solely classified as abstract. For example, a timbre identifiably reminiscent of, or derived from a stringed instrument could be classified as being suggestive or evocative, as it may be musically referential.¹³⁵

Spatial Abstraction

The model can also be applied to spatial representation and spatial abstraction, and in this respect the model is considered relevant to spatial approaches in the multichannel works presented. Extensions of spatial features, spatial scaling, or spatial transformations may abstract spatial characteristics to create an imagined alternate reality, or 'surreality'. The potential, or intended perceptual effect of which can be considered using the defined terms in the model. A lucid representation of a space might be believable as existing within a 'real' environment, irrespective of whether it is achieved using a raw multichannel recording, or through a fabricated space constructed to reflect the real. Materials that are spatially extended or scaled in circumspace may become obscured or suggestive through this process. The combinatory effect of multiple sound materials with differing, opposing, or

¹³⁴ For example, the composer may consider the listener's possible changing perceptual relationship with transformed materials once the original source materials have been revealed. In this example, spectral or spatial associations and relationships may be more easily identified by the listener after a 'reveal', and these relationships may then be further developed and extended by the composer.

¹³⁵ Instrumental sounds, whether these are acoustically derived or synthesised, will invariably have their own cultural and personal associations for the listener which contribute to their overall perceptual experience.

incoherent spatial features may result in an unrealistic or surreal spatial effect which could be defined using the chimerical end of the continuum. As before, perceptual experience for the listener will most likely be both dynamic and individual. Many of the multichannel works presented move through a *spatial continuum*, sometimes with multiple elements or materials existing simultaneously within different realms of abstraction.¹³⁶

Final Comments

The models discussed here are presented as a means of highlighting personal aesthetic approaches, and offer some insight into compositional thinking when composing the multichannel fixed media electroacoustic pieces included in the portfolio. It is important to note that discussion of perception and perceptual features is from the composer's perspective, and no definitive assumptions are made about the listener's possible perceptual experiences of each work.

¹³⁶ See *Phase Transitions* as an example.