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Trevor Wishart's Globalalia: Initial Listenings and Question Marks

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This paper provides a sketch of an analytical approach, outlining listening strategies that could be used as the basis for an analysis of Wishart's Globalalia. The significance of initial listenings will be discussed, and some questions arising from those first experiences of the work will be considered. While this paper poses more questions about the work than provides analytical observations, some potential areas for investigation within a full analysis will be identified.

1. The Approach

The proposed approach focuses on recurrent phenomena within the work. A recurrence might be considered as an event that occurs again over short or long timescales. However, the Oxford English Dictionary definition provokes further consideration regarding what to recur means:

Recur . . . occur again periodically or repeatedly . . . (of a thought, image, or memory) come back to one's mind . . . (recur to) go back to (something) in thought or speech.

Accordingly, musical recurrence can also be thought to account for sound materials that refer back to earlier related instances. Such referrals might be based on different degrees of similarity, ranging from apparent sameness to vestigial resemblance. Recurrent phenomena might include returning states, event types, or derivations produced through sound transformation processes.

The idea of recurrence in acousmatic music, as discussed by Seddon (2013), deals with issues of (i) correspondence—how sounds appear to relate to one another, in terms of spectromorphological features and source bonding—and (ii) temporal relationships—the different time spans over which those related sounds occur. Other factors contributing to the perception of recurrent phenomena include: the structural function of recurrent sounds; the expectations evoked; the role of memory and what is retained of a given sound; and impressions of space. Awareness of what contributes to a sound's identity is essential i.e. what makes it distinguishable from other sound events. To hear a recurrence, the sound material must be striking and differentiable from its surroundings in the first instance. The strength of the identity will affect first impressions as well as the interpretation of subsequent occurrences. As such, we are concerned with the ways in which the constituent sound identities exhibit common characteristics and are perceived to be related.

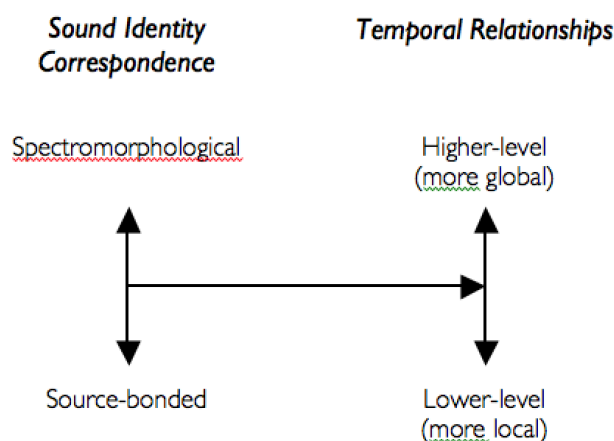


Figure 1. Basic principles for a recurrence-based approach.

Figure 1 illustrates the basic principles for a recurrence-based approach. The various aspects of sound identity correspondence

and temporal relationships are interrelated. For example, there must be a temporal relationship between two sounds that correspond. And a shared source bonding may be perceived because the sound identities correspond spectromorphologically. Furthermore, one might understandably ask 'where do lower-level relationships end and higher-level relationships begin?' Overall, it is more likely that impressions of recurrence may be best considered as lying along the two continua rather than at the extremes.

How might such ideas be used when listening to and analysing a particular work? Does one attend to higher-level or lower-level relationships in the first instance? And is there a specific method or approach? This depends on the music in question. Globalalia is rich in recurrent phenomena, operating over a variety of timescales. During initial listening, attention was drawn to higher-level events i.e. significant sounds or sound-types recurring more globally. Sectional breaks and contrasts were also evident, and listening essentially involved getting a basic overview and overall sense of the work. This does not mean that lower-level relationships, such as repetition or variation, are ignored, but rather the detailed aspects of these lower-level relationships would be returned to at a later stage of analysis. It would be difficult to retain much information regarding such relationships on initial listening.

Considering an overview naturally raises the issue of form, and McAdams's ideas are useful. For McAdams, form "is accumulated in the mind of a listener" (1989: 181), and "large-scale form is the shape of experience through time and its resonating reminiscences, rather than a structure out of time that one holds before the mind's ear in its entirety" (MCADAMS et al. 2004: 299). This view draws attention to the importance of time in the perception of form, of what is held in consciousness during and after listening, thus emphasising the experiential nature of form. So a 'formal' impression might be established through resonating reminiscences and shaped experience. But which resonating reminiscences linger in memory after listening to Globalalia? How might recurrent phenomena contribute to the perception of specific resonating reminiscences?

2. Listening and analysing?

When approaching Globalalia, might one examine the mapped-out terrain of the work, guided by some kind of score or sketch? Or might one want to account for aspects of the listening experience, albeit from a 'recurrence' point of view? Roy (2003: 182) and Nattiez (1990: 96) have both noted the distinction between the analyst's perspective, informed by repeated and concentrated listening activities, and that of the listener, who encounters the work in real-time. However, a valuable perspective might be attained by considering the important first impressions that frame one's idea of 'what the work is' (a 'listener' approach), whilst exploring in detail the various events of the work aided by some kind of graphic score (an 'analytical' approach). Impressions from initial real-time listening can, and perhaps should, inform certain analytical tasks. To do this, one must ensure the retention of those initial perspectives, which might otherwise get lost during analysis.

3. Questions arising when considering Globalalia

Initial listenings are important because they frame the first impressions of the work, effecting what is striking or significant, and what deserves further examination. What questions were raised during initial listenings to Globalalia? What aspects of the work drew attention, requiring further exploration? The following are only some of the questions arising, and not all are unique to a recurrence-based approach. Two kinds of questions were apparent. 'Preliminary' arose both before and during the first listening, accounting for some immediate responses as well as some more general considerations. 'Further enquiry' questions emerged during the two subsequent listenings; the music was occasionally paused to note pertinent features e.g. timings of events.

3.1 The Sound World

Preliminary: What is the territory/sound world/domain of this work? What is its totality? What are the significant sounds within the listening experience? Why are they significant?

Further Enquiry: What does this sound world mean to the listener? How does it emotionally affect them as a human being, with their particular knowledge of the everyday world?

3.2 Impressions of Form

Preliminary: What is retained after the first listening? What is the immediate impression of the 'form' of the work?

Further enquiry: How does the formal impression change/evolve with subsequent listening? How is the work structured? Do observations regarding structure help or hinder one's experience of musical form?

3.3 Sections

Preliminary: Sectional distinctions are apparent (endings; beginnings).

Further enquiry: Some sections can be distinguished at:

0'00–6'16;
 6'16–8'28;
 8'28–13'20;
 13'24–17'29;
 17'29–21'57;
 22'00–29'00.

What contributes to the sectional identities? Are there any significant common features? Do any sections or sectional identities recur? How do these sections progress? And do any progressions recur? Are there any significant structural functions, for example, sectional onsets, terminations, or continuations?

3.4 Notable Sound Identities

(a) The Yell

Preliminary: Why is the 'yell' (from the opening of the work) recurring?

Further enquiry: Why is the yell important? Is it because it occurs frequently, or because it resonates with the human listener in a more primal way, or both? How does its recurrence contribute to the sound world of the work?

The yell recurs throughout the work, creating a series of marker points that both create a sense of temporal perspective, and evolve into to new material, e.g. the sustained yell that gradually ascends in pitch at 5'45. Furthermore, this idea of pitch ascent becomes significant in many of the other sound materials. So how does the notion of pitch ascent connect these different sounds? How similar are the ascending sounds in other terms, such as shared source bonding? Is 'pitch ascent' a significant recurrent phenomenon in itself?

(b) Granular vocal sounds

Preliminary: Granular 'vocal' textures are present. Do the different granular textures correspond and relate?

Further Enquiry: Why do granular textures of vocal material appear to recur at the beginning of some sections? How and why do they differ? What is the significance of the different phonemes? The sectional instances appear to focus on phonemes from different languages, but ones that are sonically/spectromorphologically similar. Is this the case? How are the phoneme-based passages significant to my accumulating impression of form?

(c) Pulsed (regularly iterative) sounds

Preliminary: Beyond the notion of pulse, how do they correspond? How do they differ?

Further Enquiry: Are the pulses composed from different sound material? What do the different pulse rates contribute to the unfolding music? Are the pulse rates progressively slower or faster? Do they recur in similar contexts? Do they perform similar functions? For example, is there a relationship between the pulse sounds at 0'44, 1'09, 4'33, and then later at 9'16? Initial listening suggests that they are related, but in what ways are they?

(d) Rhythmic/pitch figures

Preliminary: Different instances occur. Do the rhythmic and melodic/pitch profiles relate?

Further Enquiry: What are the tonalities (whole-tone?) and harmonies (whole-tone? augmented?), and why are these particular harmonies present? Is this culturally significant?

3.5 Processes of Abstraction

How are the passages of gradual abstraction (either through sound processing or through my own changing perception of repeated looping figures) significant to my interpretation of the work? How do the processes progress? Does this change the sound's identity? Is the process part of that identity?

3.6 Reflective Questions

Further questions inevitably arise after listening, 'reflectively' considering one's experience after the event rather than during it. For example:

- Are there important cultural aspects that affect my interpretation?
- Why is attention drawn to certain sounds, even if they only recur occasionally? Why are they striking?
- Does it matter whether or not 'related' sounds truly seem 'alike', as long as one sound serves to remind of another? Why might such reminding be significant to the interpretation of the work?

- Are there any more covert, or initially less-obvious, relationships among sounds? Do these have a poetic significance not immediately grasped? How can the poetic aspects of this work be accounted for?

4. Final Thoughts

This paper has outlined a very basic sketch of an approach to the analysis of Globalalia, based on recurrent phenomena. Initial real-time listenings and the resulting first impressions have prompted various questions, which have in turn illuminated possible areas for analytical enquiry. While these questions represent only some of the aspects of recurrence at play (for example, lower-level temporal relationships deserve full attention), they provide a useful starting point for further investigations. Significantly, the questions remind of what was initially striking during real-time listening. By retaining those important first impressions, both 'listener' and 'analyst' perspectives might be valuably incorporated into an in-depth discussion of the work. Naturally, one must also consider how an analysis might help make some kind of sense of the work. Some of the questions concern how recurrent sounds might be interpreted (for example, why, and in what ways, is the yell important?), and such ideas would be further explored in the full analysis of Globalalia.

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