**Live Listening: Transfigurations through Rhythm**

HARK live listening events have been the end points for listening groups who have listened to reproduced recorded music. Live Events attempt to create spaces in which a unique event takes place. In this space listeners are encouraged to play, in the ludic sense as well as the instrumental, and to be in touch with the visceral, embodied sense of sound and music. We try to encourage a sense of participation by emphasising how listeners constitute the event and are not passive recipients of sounds and performed music.

The event is constituted by the co-presence of players, conductors, composers, critics and listeners gathered as a listening installation, a human sculpture, distributed across a space. There are other ways of experiencing and describing this eventness as having co-sentience and presence-sense, and of describing the nature of constituting a human installation as it also constitutes us as its members: the collapse of interiority/exteriority by the nature of the resonance of sound ‘inside’ the body and its shared and indistinguishable immersion in the body’s environing space, its acoustic enspacement. In another discourse this participation creates exploratory possibilities for the relationship between the ‘self’ and the ‘group’ allowing participants to become more aware of their willingness to be open to these experiences.

Energy derives from the co-sentience of the participants: some anxious, some expectant; some with the learned possibility of being without memory and expectation – letting go of assumptions, being beyond the simple aesthetic pleasure principle – others with an acute ear for whatever happens. Our embodied presence is waiting for the presence of sound yet in a live event it is soon to be lost again in the ether and will echo as memory. This is the phenomenology of lived experience. Our vision and approach is set out in the paper ‘Ways of Listening” which is available on HARK.org.uk.

Our events so far have foregrounded: the intimacy of piano playing by Joseph Fleetwood, his intense skill and mastery and the lyricism of the sound as word-pictures, and stories; then with a composer Errollyn Wallen and an orchestra under Bede Williams, a focus on the rich harmonies of a four movement piece with the superimposition of the images and words that arose from the listenings to it performed with it – a performed ethnography. In these events we have been both encouraging the playful social experience of listening to sounds and music, and also the shared articulation of that experience.

So it is worth reflecting that Bach was only ever to hear his composition of the St John Passion four times in his life and none of them was complete. The very possibility of hearing composed music before what Walter Benjamin called the ‘mechanical reproduction of music’ entailed not only a whole different context of ‘getting there’ but also a wholly different listening *habitus*. So the Sounding event entails a whole raft of underlying HARK explorations (which can also be formulated as action –research questions): eventness; listening regimes; co-presence, sociality; bodily resonance; embodied practices; enspacement; nd particularly in this percussion event temporality, time, pulses, beats and rhythm.

Soundings will focus on *percussion.* This includes pulses, beats, rhythms, and ways that these sounds are made, by touching, brushing, caressing, tapping, striking, scraping, rubbing, on a range of materials and instruments. We also bring these percussive practices to play upon elements in the natural world, and to their various states of cultural transformation into objects – to stones and to metal. We will create two installations, one of stone and one of metal which will be ‘played’ both ludically and musically.

Our starting point is to ask how we can listen to and hear sounds made by touching these materials. Our engagement with these processes and elements may move from random natural soundings of objects, to more patterned interactions, to disciplined performance, and to participation in improvisation by the participants as a whole listening installation. Some of these activities will take place in the unique acoustic space of the Silo where resonance, and echo become amplified to a palpable and transfiguring/transforming extent – I shall explore the difference and complementarity between these two tacit capacities.

We are interested in embodied knowledge that comes from visceral experiences. Words may even arise and be used in a kind of poetics to hold and express our experience. This playful celebration of percussive resonance is not being theorised to produce a reductive explanation of experience, and we are interested in how sounds have significance for listeners rather than supposing that their experiences can best be represented in meanings.

The design of the Soundings event might give rise to the idea of progression from the random ludic playfulness, especially of younger people, to the mature expert performance of professional musicians, a progression, as it were, from sound to music. This is another aspect of our musical listening habitus that we seek to challenge – that musicians listening, or players listening is what audiences aspire to. We seek to bring these activities into a more dynamic conversation. I presenting percussionists with a stone installation we are creating a challenge:

The instrument does not just yield passively to the desire of the musician. It is not a blank slate waiting for an inscription. Likewise the musician does not just turn the instrument to her own ends, bending it to her will against whatever resistance it offers. Rather musician and instrument meet, each drawing the other out of its native territory (Evens, 2005,161).

So consistent with HARK’s vision how can we approach percussion, and percussive activity with stones and metal?

I try here to give a practical example through an exploration in listening to a seminal piece of percussion – Steve Reich’s *Drumming* (1974). It takes 65’34’’. First of all you might wonder if you can sustain listening to drums for more than an hour. One way to find out is to try and also to reflect on the experience. Information and background can be useful but it is just as well to dive straight in. You can either do that now or read on….

There are four sections to *Drumming*. At the start we find a simple foot-tap single beat rhythm. We get with that beat easily enough, we can even elaborate on it ourselves filling in the gaps. We feel the do-DAH, do-DAH, Steve (do) and us (DAH). So quite quickly we are participating in the sound in time, and a time we feel we can make some sense of. We start to enjoy the elaborations, and can even imagine some of our own. Our body has also independently started to move ever so slightly, and we may be finger-beating or foot-tapping along. The texture starts to become denser and the beats more complex. Even at this early stage with a two-beat figure we can hear and feel the way in which we listen the emphasis onto a particular beat. We can go do–DAH, or we can make a shift and go DO–dah. We are already at play. An image of someone falling behind, out of step might appear to us.

It is interesting to know that this is called a ‘phasing technique’ which Steve Reich used, and that this is the final culmination of his use of this technique. He stops using it after *Drumming*. Phasing is when two or three indentical instruments play the same repeated melodic pattern and gradually move out of synchronisation with each other. So we start by following the beat and rhythm, filling in gaps with our off-beats, and enjoying the elaborations. We also get a sense of the control of the playing, the tightness of the score and that this is not loose drumming. As the piece develops the complexity of the beat and the cross-beats becomes more difficult to simply follow as beats. We seek aural anchor points or shapes.

A small transfiguration takes place – we can perceive a bigger longer pulse, a wave, as it were under the faster surface complexity. We also begin to have some choices of where our attention might rest and what we allow just to fly by. This finding of an emergent, fractal pattern within the overall dense texture and fast complexity might also go with bodily movement, the slow underlying pattern seems like ‘mine’ and the fast complexity ‘his’. This is a kind of orientation listening, we feel we have some purchase on the beats by feeling an implicit pulse or wave. Think about how we key into the dance rhythm and decide on the pace of our movements.

I want to digress to note the use of the word ‘transfiguration’. By this I mean the way in which our listening shapes what we hear, how we foreground certain aspects, for example, how we shift the beat emphasis, and find underlying pulses hat are ‘under’ the beat, as I noted above. This goes on at the same time as the sound/ music is transforming itself. We open to the sound/music experience when these two processes are so interpenetrating that any notions of inside/outside, subjective and objective become elided and fall away as understandings. The outcome of this dynamic of listening transfigurations and sound/music transformations has the outcome of creating bodily resonance, we let the sound/music inhabit us and we live also in the sound/music – the dancer is the dance. So this is not simply a static gestalt, or a trompe l’oeil but is a dynamic auditory analogue with differences – the ‘object’ the sound/music is transforming itself as we listen, and we are transfiguring our (in)attention to create what we hear.

So to return to the *Drumming* listening experience, as the piece progresses we are introduced to timbre and some pitches. These are difficult to articulate but ‘click’, ‘blurp’, ‘blup’, ‘chirp’, ‘tinny’, ‘skin’, ‘rasp’ are some onomatopoeia that suggest these qualities. At one stage in Part 1 three drummers are playing the same pattern, but one-quarter note out of phase with each other. Three marimba players enter softly with the same pattern also out of phase, but these timbres are quite different to the drums. Slowly the drums fade and the marimbas play high to the pattern and the three glockenspiels play the same figure low. The result is that the rhythm pattern is maintained, it is the same beat pattern, but the timbre becomes the change agent – hence the sense of onomatopoeia and our tendency to express timbre in mouth sounds/music. Some musicologist do indeed draw a key relationship between rhythm in music as relating to language – melody being ‘narrative’ and ‘life-story’ and harmony being ‘landscape’ and ‘architecture’.

We find we are sometimes making timbres with sounds we are making in our mouths, ‘tutting’ and making ‘clopping’ sounds. In deed when Reich was composing the piece he found himself imitating the sounds with syllables like ‘tuk’, ‘tok’ and ‘duk’ and he did this loudly by amplification to find and bring out a sub-pattern. So as well as finger-tapping, bodily movement in slow dance-like gestures in the trunk of the body, swaying and nodding we can add these pre-linguistic mouth sounds. Our bodies are already well engaged in listening.

This also gives rise to transfiguration. This movement between what is in the sound and what I focus on will as I have noted cease to be a binary or a subject-object relation but become apparent as being a single figural gestalt aspect of listening and in dynamic time. We can ‘come’ and ‘go’, oscillate between these modes of one big shape. It can sometimes be difficult to be sure what is ‘in’ the music and what is my imaginative participation in the sound by the way I hear patterns, timbres and pitches. Sometimes I am confident, what I hear is surely in the sound patterns. Yet this confidence is undermined by the realisation that I am perceiving patterns in the sound and that these might be ‘mine’. This is an endless impossible process in which we can never wholly distinguish between what we are discovering and what we are inventing as we listen. This state is what we might call an ‘opening’ transfiguration and may require us to ‘give-in’ to the sound experience, and to give up attempts to ‘make-sense’, track or understand the sound/music. Relieving ourselves of these schema, listening frameworks, predispositions, and the simple pleasure principle is itself something that we can notice by attending to our listening. Some musicologists, notably Lawrence Kramer, and some philosophers, notably Jean-Luc Nancy, and Coradi Fiumara think this is part of our reflexive insight of ourselves.

As the piece progresses the beat bounces off the underlying ‘structure’, it is of course felt as a structure because of the coalescing of the fast complexity of the movements of the players making it sound as it were like some solid surface. It feels like someone running very fast whilst keeping some object very steady resting in their palm. However fast and complex the sounds we seem always to be able to find a fractal pattern, or shape that emerges. We find a listening ‘pace’ of that we can relate to as a measure, we imagine walking or counting. We are drawn to measure. We grow up with bar lines, we like to chop time up into manageable and often equal segments. And so we can here until we become aware that this too is an illusion, and the beat has moved on.

We now start to listen for those changes, the beat out of place, that heralds a shift to a new pattern. We begin to yearn for that unexpected surprise that is, of course expected. Sometimes when this happens there is a third transfiguration, which is when we precisely notice that the patterns has changed but we are not sure how or when it happened even though we might have been listening for it. It is not precise at all, and has simply colonised the soundscape and we have now noticed it. It is as if the piece has a reproductive capability, it seems to be able generate its own future shape – a kind of autopoesis. It shape-shifts in front of our ears.

Suddenly the beats and pulses of drums is joined by high pitched marimbas arriving like a flock of birds into the soundscape. Now the beat has a pitch, tonality and a sweetness come with this arrival. An so the piece continues…..

What I am trying to illustrate here by a practical example is the way in which we can approach listening to percussion, and how our HARK event might stimulate this and allow shared reflections on it. It also illustrates the universality of the HARK approach and its relationship to professional and trained musicianship. There is a key discussion to be had here between the ethos of performance engendered by conductors and players and the listening habitus created by an ‘audience’.