Acousmatique / Acousmatic Music

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compiled by Scott Wyatt

In 1955, the writer and poet Jérôme Peignot, at the beginning of musique concrète, used the adjective *acousmatique*, meaning 'a sound that we can hear without knowing its cause.'

It is true that over the past twenty years, under the term electroacoustics there has been a proliferation of sound pieces that have little in relation to each other except a common use of electricity. It was therefore important to affirm, with precise terminology, æsthetic choices, a body of thought, and a language.

Thus, this music—acousmatique—was conceived from its beginnings to be heard without the use of visual intervention. It does not involve any instrumentalist on stage—with the possible exception of the person who projects the work during a public performance in order to maximize the use of the given space. The absence of visual identification makes it anonymous, unifies and prompts a more attentive listening.

If music has always been closely associated with its reproduction by performers, as opposed to many other art forms that are once and for all fixed on a medium (painting, literature, cinema, video…), it is due to the impossibility to do so differently, and not by choice. Never before, until this day, could one capture, keep, and reproduce a faithful image of sound phenomena. Before, it was necessary to use a more or less precise symbolic notation to capture the ideas of composers.

Hybrids exist, and this is all well and good, for this a sign of the vitality of 'music on support', but the multiplicity of aesthetics without doubt renders the use of any single name impossible,

Acousmatic music posses a power of evocation born of the rupture of the connection between the source of the sound, and the sound; a rupture that allows the listener to create new, imaginary connections, and/or to follow those suggested by the composer.

Acousmatic music is a method of composition that calls upon this kind of listening.

The term acousmatic music is here partly interchangeable with the term *musique concrète* as originally intended by Schaeffer and reiterated by Michel Chion (1993). Acousmatic music is music that is recorded and

then diffused without combination with live electronics or live performers; it exists only on tape or CD or as a fixed set of instructions to a computer.

The term acousmatic is preferred to concrète as it emphasizes the way in which the 'real' acoustic source is assumed to be hidden from the audience.

Acousmatic music does not exclude the use of synthesis or sound processing; but these processes must be employed in the making of a fixed artifact that is then diffused, rather than employed during performance.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary "acousmatic" was derived from ancient Greek, the literal meaning being: "one willing to hear."

The listener can easily construct, often automatically and unconsciously, a connection between sound and source and the significance of the acousmatic situation is minimized.

The focus of acousmatic listening is*: source recognition is deferred and the relationship between the sound as object and the subject's listening processes becomes paramount*.

The acousmatic situation encourages composers to explore the potential that each individual feature of sound might have for articulating musical structure. Schaefferian terminology defines these form-creating aspects as values (valeurs).

Reduced listening is a specific form of directed perception. The sound is heard as an object of perception in its own right - hence the term "sound object". Attention is given to all intrinsic qualities and any speculation of causal origin is suspended. **Reduced listening** is, in a sense, intentionally unnatural.   By deliberately disregarding source identification or any potential message that might be communicated, the listener is free to concentrate on the sound's inherent features.

Acousmate. n. (from the Greek Akousma, what is heard). Imaginary sound, or of which the cause is not seen.