

**Headphone Listening**  
**and the Visceral Experience**  
**of Electronic Music**

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In Chapter 7 of *The Soundscape: Our Environment and the Tuning of the World*, R. Murray Schafer makes an interesting observation: the aural environment of a given era influences the styles of music being written at that time, which in turn have a pronounced effect on the way audiences hear music. Schafer identifies three specific types of listening, the first of which is associated with 'classical' concert music. This style of music is designed (socially and aesthetically) to function as an entity separate from the listener, and thus requires complete and sustained concentration while the listener (usually) attends a live performance in a hall with a number of other audience members. The second type of listening is connected to modern popular music and contemporary classical music. Now, the listener is hearing music via stereo speakers, most likely in the comfort of his/her home, possibly without any other listeners. The focus in this kind of listening is to feel physically immersed in the sound, rather than recognizing it as an object requiring close scrutiny. An intensified version of this second type is found in the final category: headphone listening. Here, the music seems to "emanate from points in the cranium itself" (Schafer 119). The experience of music is not just physical or intellectual; it is now instinctual. The listener can almost become one with the music, absorbing it on a primeval level and leaving behind the external world.

The styles of music most enhanced by headphone listening create a visceral experience that allows the audience to enter a different mental state than that of everyday activity. Contemporary classical music, particularly electronic music, is ideally suited to headphone listening as it frequently pushes the boundaries of what is traditionally defined as music. Indeed, Edgar Varèse thought of himself as "a worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities" while

viewing music as “organized sound” (CCCM<sup>1</sup> 207). This can clearly be seen in the style of such instrumental works as *Amériques* and *Intégrales*, but is most pronounced in his electronic works. Varèse believed music created in an electronic studio could achieve an ideal not possible with acoustic instruments and performers. Though technology could not accommodate his ambitions until late in his life, Varèse had long anticipated the new style of music he (and others like him) could create in such a studio, emphasizing that:

“There will no longer be the old conception of melody or interplay of melodies. The entire work will be a melodic totality. The entire work will flow as a river flows.” (CCCM 197)

The realization of this long-held aesthetic can be found in *Poème Électronique* (1958), a tape piece designed as part of a multi-media event including lights and projected images. A rich palette of timbres derived from what seems like a large number of sound sources surround the listener and take him/her on a temporal journey. Individual ideas float by as part of a mélange of melodies (or melodic fragments), harmonies, and colors. Form is not created through traditional schemata or through any noticeable repetition; rather, a sense of continuity is created through the incorporation of disparate elements into a unified mood. The unexpected shifts in material keep the listener on edge as does the wide variety of unusual sounds included in the piece. This effect works on the intellectual and instinctive levels of consciousness, creating an experience that involves a person’s mind and body.

To maximize this phenomenon, Varèse initially intended the piece to be played through 425 loudspeakers surrounding the audience as projected images and colored lights created a multi-sensory experience. Due to the logistical difficulty of recreating that presentation of the work (both the audio and visual components), listeners are more likely to encounter *Poème*

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<sup>1</sup> In parenthetical references, CCCM refers to the book, *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*.

*Électronique* as a recording played through stereo speakers or headphones. The loss of the visual elements is a strong blow to the overall experience of this originally multi-media work, but the unique character of headphone listening does preserve most of the visceral quality of the original audio. Though the piece may be challenging for some listeners, this difficulty is precisely what can induce that sublime musical experience, which is optimized by listening to such a work through headphones.

Still, a similar experience can be created using other means as well. Steve Reich's work *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), uses distortions of the familiar to elicit a primeval response in his audience. The piece falls in two sections, each built on a fragment of the same sound source: a man preaching about the Biblical flood. This source is familiar on multiple levels as it uses a recognizable human voice speaking clearly about a subject that many people will know. However, the treatment of this accessible material is quite complex. The sound samples were recorded on tape, which was later used to create phasing. In the article "Music as a Gradual Process – 1968", Reich reveals: "the distinct thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the over all form simultaneously" (CCCM 422).

This philosophy certainly applies to *It's Gonna Rain*, whose musical elements arise from the phasing of the otherwise minimally processed original sound sources. The rhythm of the words themselves and of the interplay between the various iterations of the text and text fragments create the main interest of the piece. The through-composed form grows out of the temporal processes to which the sound sources are subjected. By exploring the full potential of a limited amount of material, Reich creates a tightly focused work that can easily hold a listener's attention throughout an experience that is more visceral than intellectual.

After the opening of each half (where the respective sound samples are heard in an unaltered form), the music seems at first like a schizophrenic outburst, almost as if the sounds were originating in the listener's head. Rather than perceiving a clear melody or harmony, he/she feels surrounded by the initially overwhelming and chaotic swirl of the preacher's voice played against itself. As the piece progresses, the listener becomes absorbed into the sound world and gradually gets attuned to the subtle, changing relationships between the different levels of the texture (which, though intricate, never becomes too dense for the listener to follow). This change of focus is indeed the ultimate goal of phasing music according to Reich:

“While performing and listening to gradual musical processes, one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* towards *it*.” (CCCM 424)

The conclusion of Shafer's chapter echoes this sentiment, stating that headphone listening causes a person to become focused within him/herself. This type of listening stems from and feeds into styles of music being written whose effect it enhances exponentially. In the two works discussed above, the composers have set out to accomplish a clear purpose: to draw the listener into a meaningful sound world that allows him/her to achieve a heightened sense of musical, intellectual, and emotional awareness through a strongly physical and psychological experience. In the case of Varèse's *Poème Électronique*, that world is full of sounds listeners may never have experienced or imagined whereas the world of Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* is a bustling, whirlwind of voices (sometimes intelligible, other times not). In either case, the listener can become absorbed in a physical experience of music that can turn one's mind in new directions.

## **Bibliography**

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