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Attention! Attention!
The use of 'focus & attention' in sonic art

Krisztián Hofstädter SID: 0610279
Creative Music Technology
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“ 'Our own words' are inadequate even to express the meaning of other words; how much more inadequate, when it is a matter of rendering meanings which have their original expression in terms of music or one of the visual art! What, for example, does music 'say'? (Huxley, 1935)”

Introduction

To write about music is challenging: even the best authors describe music as inexpressible using words and some would even say that to express feelings about a musical piece should only be considered adequate if this act itself is music (Steiner, 1989). Sonic art, also known as sound art, is very specifically defined as art that has a sound focus, and is usually gallery-based (Kelly, 2009, p.17). '... from fine art to performance, from film to interaction installations, from poetry to sculpture and, of course, not forgetting music, all these can be of the part of the multicultural society that is sonic art (Gibbs, 2007, p.9).' In this paper some aspects of the use of 'focus & attention' in certain musical works is examined with a deliberately eclectic choice of examples from the literature tradition and positive psychology, as well as with examples of sonic art.ⁱ I attempt to outline why 'focus & attention' should be considered important in both the creation and the perception of sonic art and also to investigate the usefulness of audience participation in the performance. Such participation helps the audience to become a part of the creative process - which should lead to an increased engagement in order to let the audience pay more attention to the artwork. The use of 'focus and attention' is a method which helps to achieve a better understanding of the artwork.

Deeper Structures, Attention and Music

'It is for a music which can touch our conscience, deepen our consciousness, awaken our sensualities, give expression to our ideals and aspirations, and stoke the fires of our optimism, determinism, and our audaciousness, when they burn too low (Dale, 1968, p.486).'

In '*Digital Mantras*' the author synthesises ideas from different disciplines; eastern philosophy, art and computer science amongst others. He writes: 'What is special about each vehicle of expression is its distinct perspective, its ability to uniquely express a concept' and later 'each

manifestation is in some way an interpretation of a deeper shared structure (Holtzman, 1996, p.269).ⁱ Art (visual art, sonic art - music, literature, etc...) and science (mathematics, quantum physics, etc...) might draw on the same source at some deeper level of existence. 'The meaning can only be explained in terms of the human content in which expressions are interpreted, ... the purpose of the interpretation is the key to the meaning of an expression' (Holtzman, 1996, p. 290).ⁱⁱ Any artistic work, or perhaps any man-made concept therefore primarily depends on the purpose of the creator, which is the self. After Csikszentmihalyi (1992), it is attention which shapes self, and it is self which influences attention.ⁱⁱⁱ A logical assumption would be that such command over one's states of mind i.e. the ability to maintain focus and to pay attention is beneficial for the evolution of the self, which is the creator. However this does not mean that the ability to concentrate the mind and the ability to use the skill to sustain attention will help to forge an artistic work, - to help to create a community of interest or even appreciation. The artist needs to practice in order to achieve mastery, which itself needs 'focus & attention'.^{iv}

Music in the broadest sense can be perceived as an expression of self-differentiation: separation of self from nature, separation of man from man and finally separation of man from himself. Three major transformations in the evolution of music can be observed. (1) *Non-music to music as non-art (magic)*, where sound signals in the animal world become magical signs and symbols in primitive tribal music; (2) followed in ancient times, when *music as magic* transforms into *music as art* and (3) more recently when *music as art* closes the circle and becomes *music as non-art, non-music and anti-art* (Dale, 1968, pp. 477-478). This last transformation involves the progress of sonic art.

Although there have been many attempts to introduce dissonance in the history of music, these innovations were not welcomed by the church (Carlo Gesualdo, who introduced scale changes in his compositions) or by certain religious or political regimes (the nazis banned serialism). Today some artists would say that taboos and strict rules are not productive. Disillusion with classical tonality can be heard in the works of Schubert, Chopin and Liszt. It was in the works of Wagner and Strauss where atonality began to appear. Later in the avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism, new musical methods and expressions (serialism, aleatoric music, technology and computer aided music, sonic art, etc...) proliferated and replaced the autocracy of Pythagorus' harmonic relation (the circle of fifths). Atonality and serialism can be seen as a 'glorious open door to a future classicism' (Dale, 1968, p.482). Aleatoric music with a particular emphasis on 'focus & attention', for instance in various works by John Cage, asks each individual in the audience to become creative with their own thoughts.

Intelligent Music

'No stupid literature, art or music lasts. Aesthetic creation is intelligent in the highest degree (Steiner, 1989, p.11).'

Like Friedl in 'Some Sadomasochistic Aspects of Musical Pleasure' I also focus in this paper on *listening music* (Friedl, 2002, p.29)^v and categorise sonic art as a part of it. 'Focus & attention' in sonic art can be seen as a tool for a deeper understanding of the artwork. In this way we give sonic art, which is *listening music*, a function. This function is described both in Pierre Shaeffer's notion *reduced listening* and in that of Herbert Brün's *active listening* (Hugill, 2008, pp. 19-20).

'A more sophisticated listener turns away (without ceasing to hear it) from the sound event and the circumstances which it reveals about its source and uses it as a means to grasp a message, a meaning, values (Shaeffer, 1983, cited in Hugill, 2008, p. 20).'

Sonic art is organised auditory information, which when seriously attended to can induce *flow* experience^{vi}. With the help of 'focus – attention' this experience is accumulated with psychic energy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), which is necessary to create intelligent art. We can say that certain works have certain effects on our states of mind and that people not only have different states of mind, they are also different^{vii}. For example: *Fuck Off* and *Sick Film* by Martin Creed or the use of animal blood in some conceptual art, have to be considered important contemporary artworks. For certain people this kind of art induce order, joy, interesting thought combinations or perhaps *flow* experience.^{viii} Art is not about expressing beauty, it is a mirror of history, of the zeitgeist. Adorno says that, after Auschwitz it is impossible to write a poem (Friedl, 2002, p.29). However one might argue that human cruelty in history allows the will to express whatever it wants - this is clearly the case with some conceptual and contemporary art.^{ix}

In sonic art, the artist has to be a thinking musician. Hugill (2008) in his book *The Digital Musician* writes: sound artists today have to be open minded and have to have the quality of cultural curiosity. The 'musicians who know nothing other than their instrument and a tiny area of musical practice' are limited. Such specialisation in sonic art can be very infertile. 'An awareness of other musics; an ability to listen critically, to analyse, and to form judgements based on more than instant, subjective reaction; historical knowledge and a sense of future possibilities (Hugill, 2008, p.144)' are important in his career. To achieve mastery the digital musician, the sonic artist needs 'focus & attention'.

Art, Audience participation

'Sonic art is a filter for feeding deep structures back into the human ear (Young, 2005, p.77).'

In Aldous Huxley's utopian novel *Island* (Huxley, 1976) where people practice buddhism and tantric sex the most important principle is to be continuously aware of everything, both on the outside and the inside. In the novel, Huxley suggests that art should be something that everyone can understand. His advice can be interpreted as a simplification of aesthetics, however it does require a certain intelligence, in the sense of emphasising purpose. Art should be used as a tool to understand deeper structures (Huxley, 1976).^x In Huxley's writings a similar attraction to 'focus & attention' is present as is in the positive psychology by Csikszentmihalyi and in the musical work of John Cage, who was deeply involved in Zen Buddhism.

' "Eternity," he answered. "Believe it or not, it's as real as shit."

"Excellent!" she said approvingly (Huxley, 1976).'

The above conversation from *Island* is a phrase we can easily imagine in Cage's art and, also in its opposition to high- and mainstream cultural traditions early avant-garde, modernist, postmodernist and conceptual art. Huxley and Cage emphasise the importance of the presence, which again is seen as a tool to understand deeper structures for instance through Zen Buddhism. The present is a continuous flow which, by being payed attention to, can provide consciousness with a *flow experience* or perhaps with similar orderly arranged states of mind. (In the English language, the word 'present' can also means 'gift'.)

Much avant-garde, modernist and post-modernist music and sonic art help to close Dale's circle – in other words: *music as art* transforms into *music as non-art*. John Cage, amongst others, deconstructs and reinvents music. He tries to remove the composer's likes and dislikes with the help of indeterminacy. However this idea of removing the ego is controversial, as his compositions and performances have strict rules to follow and are in certain ways determined (Perloff, 2002). He was an anarchist, who did not like institutions and who wanted to collapse the institution of art into every day experience.

After World War II, it is difficult to recognise clear categories among artistic styles, many of them overlap. John Cage was an influence on both *fluxus* and *happening*. In both we can see how much the new artists of the time wanted a change, a change from the traditions employed in bourgeois art. It is an ancient wish to get as close as possible to life through art in order to unfold the deeper structures without distortion. In certain ways, 'attention & focus' is used in the

performance-based *happening* and in the minimalist *fluxus* as well. In the former, the plan for the performance is only a draft and the event unfolds with the participation of the audience (Roman, 1999). The audience becomes the creator and the artist, and the more attention the audience pays to each other the more the engagement deepens and, perhaps, the easier it becomes to achieve *flow* experience. In *fluxus* the audience is usually not participating. However, the simplicity of the artwork also suggests, as with a *happening*, an appreciation for everyday sounds and silence. It also proposes the importance of the contemplation of presence (Cage: 4'33).

'There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make silence, we cannot (Cage, cited in Gibbs, 2009, p. 9).'

Live electronics, Human Computer Interaction

'The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook (James, 1981).'

The use of interaction is common in other art forms but in sonic art it has become almost a default mode. Usually we employ computers and interfaces (for example for physical computing the Arduino chip or software such as Max/MSP or SuperCollider which are specifically used in the creation of the artwork. The most important aspect of interactivity is to map the source of good, clear information from the user, most commonly with microphones, cameras or motion sensors. Then, as a feedback from the computer, to return it to the user's senses in the form of usually visuals and sounds. Here, to 'know what to overlook' suggests to be able to focus on the useful signal and filter out noise, distortion or unwanted data.

Hugill in this book writes about the importance of 'being live', which comes from the desire to produce original sound. He mentions sound installations, where the human performer does not need to be actually present: 'In some kinds of algorithmic music, ... , the user becomes the performer, ... , in many cases, the user is practically unaware of their role as performer (Hugill, 2008, p.119).'

Many of these interactive installations use human-computer-interaction (HCI). In such an environment, the human may move through and interact with objects, just as in the physical world. The information is processed in real time in order to provide the audience and the performers with fast feedback. The participation leads the audience to become a part of the creation: engagement deepens, the audience pays more attention and therefore gets closer to the deeper structure of the artwork.

Conclusion

To write about music is challenging. Borges in *The Superstitious Ethics of the Reader* asked the question whether music could be afraid of music? He says literature predicts its own death, it is seeking for its dissolution (Borges, 2009)^{xi}. In Huxley's *Island* and in the written teachings of Zen Buddhism, we also get the impression that the use of communication with words is limited in its ability to help us understand deeper structures. “More than any other act of intelligibility and executive form, music entails differentiations between that which can be understood, that is to say, paraphrased, and that which can be thought and lived in categories, which are, rigorously considered, transcendent to such understanding (Steiner, 1989, pp.18-19).”

'Focus & attention' is the main tool to find joy and a destiny in the Palanese culture of Huxley's *Island*. 'Focus and attention' is important to experience Csikszentmihalyi's *flow* and amongst other artists it is Cage's essential method in the creation and perception of art and life. In my opinion the original meaning of the word 'focus', which is 'hearth', can be connected with our appreciation of the 'sun' – in other words with the origin of life. Perhaps it is not every artist's purpose to think about the origin of life or to question what life is on a deeper structure. However, in my humble opinion, paying attention to these underlying structures can lead the sonic artist to create valuable art.

The true ability of an appreciative communication between the artist and the audience became difficult due to the spread of subjective forms in the art-world (Roman, 1999). The sonic artist, the digital musician, has to be a thinking musician who, through cultural awareness, technological skill and critical self-evaluation, is able to create intelligent and valuable art (Hugill, 2008). In my opinion, the use of HCI is worth exploring and experimenting with in order to make a connection between the work of art and the audience. The engagement gained through participation suggests a deeper 'focus & attention', which can lead to a profound understanding of the artwork and life.

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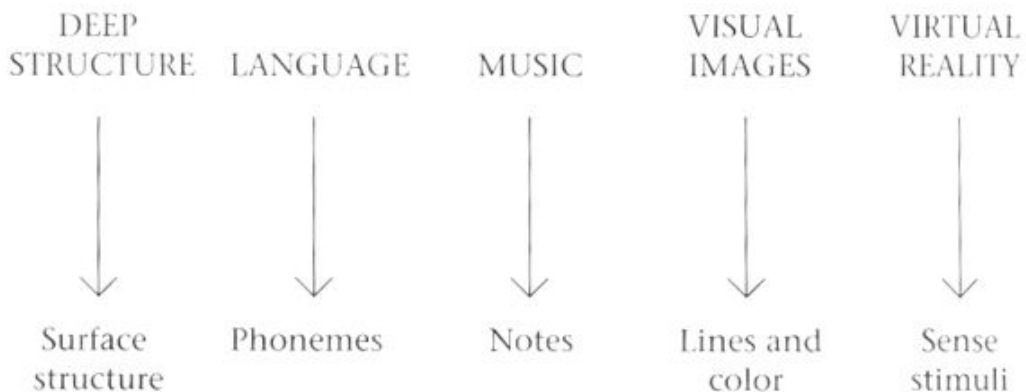
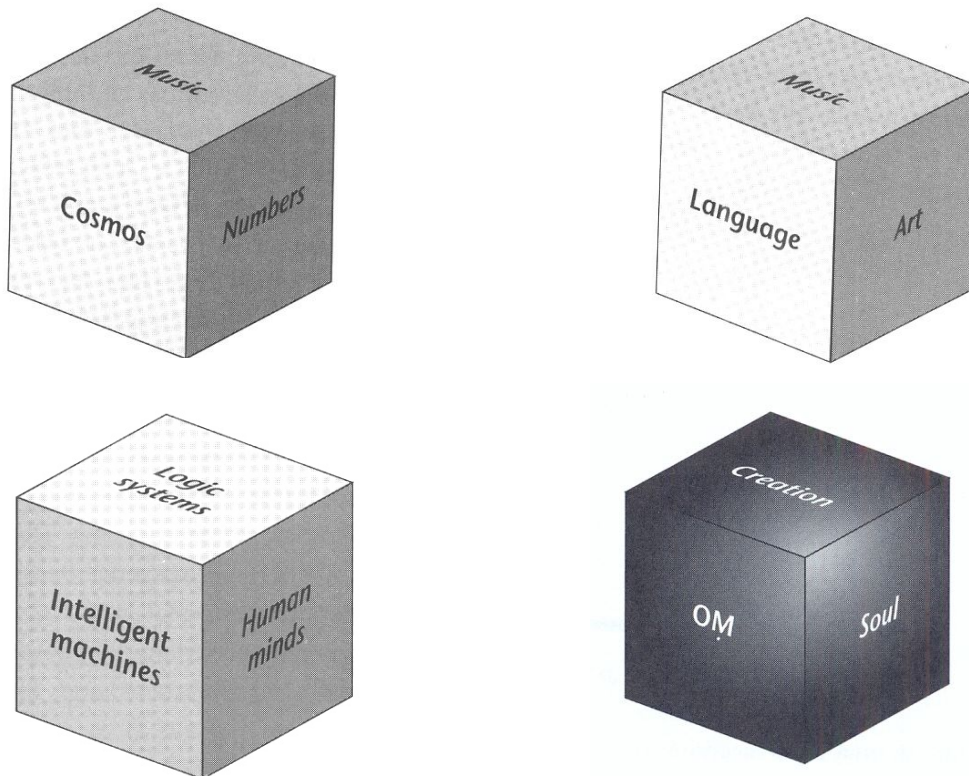
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Notes:

i In *Word Origins* (Ayto, 1990): 'Latin *focus* meant 'fireplace', and in post-classical time it came to be used for 'fire' itself ... The first writer known to have used it in its modern sense 'point of convergence' was the German astronomer Johannes Kepler, in 1604, but the reason for his choice is not clear. It may have been some metaphorical notion of the 'hearth' symbolizing the 'centre of the home' but it has been also suggested that it may have been preceded and inspired by the use of *focus* for the burning point' of a mirror (not actually recorded until somewhat later).'

In my use of the word 'focus' I would like to draw the attention of the reader to a merging of the general definition, central point, as of attraction, attention, interest or activity (Cambridge, Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2008) with the word's original meaning, 'hearth' and 'fireplace'. I do this in order to add an emotive charge to the word, which can here be comprehended by imagining a picture of a group of people sharing the presence of a warming hearth. Here 'focus and attention' can also contribute to an experience of subconscious and subliminal responses, which form an important part of our mind.

ii Picture of cubes with deeper structures from "Digital Mantras" (Holzman, 1996):



Notes:

iii The philosopher's, Martin Heidegger's views on the changing Self by Iain Thomson :

'More precisely, Being is grounded in the temporal structure of those beings ("Da-sein") who have an understanding of Being. With this famous reconceptualization of the self not as a subject, consciousness, or ego but as a "Dasein," Heidegger takes the German word for "existence" (*Dasein*) and interprets it in terms of its basic semantic elements ("there" [*Da*] + "Being" [*Sein*]) in order to illustrate his claim that existence is fundamentally a "being-there," that is, a temporally-structured making intelligible of the place in which we find ourselves.'

This quote is a reference to the 'presence [*Da Sein*] of a warming hearth' in note i.

Source: http://www.philosophers.co.uk/cafe/phil_mar2003.htm

iv In *The Story of Success* Malcolm Gladwell also argues the importance of practical intelligence over a particularly high IQ and researches whether there is such a thing as innate talent?

http://www.vedpuriswar.org/book_review/Outliers.doc
<http://www.indiana.edu/~intell/practicalintelligence.shtml>

v 'With this in mind, music can induce very different pleasures. Using an up-to-date and pragmatic categorization of musics, there is *listening music*, *dance music* and *chill-out music* (Friedl, 2002).'

vi Flow experience: A state of mind of joy, creativity and the process of total involvement with life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).

'Music, which is organised auditory information, helps organise the mind that attends to it, and therefore reduces psychic entropy, or the disorder we experience when random information interferes with goals. Listening to music wards off boredom and anxiety and when seriously attended to, it can induce flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).'

'Because attention determines what will or will not appear in consciousness, and because it is also required to make any other mental events – such as remembering, thinking, feeling, and making decisions – happen there, it is useful to think of it as a psychic energy. Attention is like energy in that without it not work can be done, and in doing work it is dissipated. We create ourselves by how we invest this energy. Memories, thoughts, and feelings are all shaped by how we use it. And it is an energy under our control, to do with as we please; hence, attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, p.33 - Anatomy of consciousness).'

vii An example of psychological types of men by Carl Gustav Jung (Hyde & McGuiness, 2008):

'Location the person's type enables the analyst to make better sense of an individual's world-view and value system. The types describe personality and frequently determine the choice of vocation or marriage partner.'

1. Extrovert Thinking (scientists, economists, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx)
2. Introvert Thinking (philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein)
3. Extrovert Feeling (chat show hosts, stars, Frank Sinatra, Madonna)
4. Introvert Feeling (monks, nuns, musicians, Chopin)
5. Extrovert Sensation (builders, speculators, Casanova)
6. Introvert Sensation (connoisseurs, aesthetes)
7. Extrovert Intuition (PR people, adventures, Robert Maxwell)
8. Introvert Intuition (mystics, poets, William Blake)

viii Martin Creed – *Fuck Off, Sick Film*

<http://www.martincreed.com/music/workno337.html>
<http://www.martincreed.com/works/workno610.html>

Ana Mendieta (an early theme in her works is violence against the female body):

<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09spring/joanna-walker.shtm>

The opposition of conceptual art is stuckism:

<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/stuckism/>

Notes:

ix Marcel Duchamp: Fontaine



Hermann Nitch:

<http://www.nitsch.org/index-en.html>

- x The art should be something what everyone can understand - from the *Island* (Huxley, 1976, XI. Part, 201p): 'A century of research on the moksha-medicine has clearly shown that quite ordinary people are perfectly capable of having visionary or even fully liberating experiences. In this respect the men and women who make and enjoy high culture are no better off than the lowbrows. High experience is perfectly compatible with low symbolic expression. The expressive symbols created by Palanese artists are no better than the expressive symbols created by artists elsewhere. Being the products of happiness and a sense of fulfillment, they are probably less moving, perhaps less satisfying aesthetically, than the tragic or compensatory symbols created by victims of frustration and ignorance, of tyranny, war and guilt-fostering, crime-inciting superstitions. Palanese superiority does not lie in symbolic expression but in an art which, though higher and far more valuable than all the rest, can yet be practised by everyone—the art of adequately experiencing, the art of becoming more intimately acquainted with all the worlds that, as human beings, we find ourselves inhabiting. Palanese culture is not to be judged as (for lack of any better criterion) we judge other cultures. It is not to be judged by the accomplishments of a few gifted manipulators of artistic or philosophical symbols. No, it is to be judged by what all the members of the community, the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, can and do experience in every contingency and at each successive intersection of time and eternity.'
- xi The essay was read in Hungarian language.
Original title of the book is "Obras Completas II."
published: (1966) Emecé, Barcelona

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