
1 Editorial: Context-based Composition

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3 Our first thematic issue, OS 22(1), introduced a body of
4 current work related to the theme of context-based
5 composition, that is, how creative work engages with
6 the ‘real world’ in terms of its epistemology and design
7 strategies, not merely anecdotally but in a fundamental
8 manner. That issue included articles across a wide
9 range of theoretical and applied topics, including
10 ecological approaches, live performance, installations,
11 mobile and ubiquitous technology, historical examples
12 and interdisciplinary practices.

13 Here we continue those lines of enquiry, first with
14 Anette Vandsø’s discussion of four key concepts for
15 studying this subject, what she refers to as ‘paratext,
16 intermediality, enunciation and mediality’, concepts
17 that help us to understand how ‘compositions establish
18 their relation to a specific context’. She focuses on
19 work that uses technology to capture sounds and/or
20 data from the real world and re-present them to
21 listeners, without necessarily constructing a virtual
22 soundscape. First is the information provided about
23 the work (paratext), plus visual information, for
24 instance (intermediality), an approach illustrated later
25 in the issue by Matilde Meireles in her installations.
26 Drawing on Barthes and Beneviste’s concept of
27 enunciation, she discusses how compositional techni-
28 ques can draw attention to context, directly with
29 speech and indirectly through other actions. Finally,
30 she points to the specific aspects of audio technology
31 (mediality) that are not merely creating inscriptions
32 but act as ‘transmissional’, to use Douglas Kahn’s term
33 (Kahn 2013). Ultimately, she argues that such works
34 draw on our knowledge of the world, and also influ-
35 ence how we understand and talk about that world.

36 Marinos Koutsomichalis continues the discussion
37 around a set of current practices involving ‘material
38 inquiry, anti-optimality, and hybrid, reflexive or
39 “meta” interfaces’, as well as collaborative appro-
40 aches, all of which function outside of the traditional
41 aesthetic paradigm. He interprets the significance of
42 this new ad hoc aesthetics in terms of ‘emergence,
43 transience and post-selfhood’, traits that emerge from
44 the nature of contemporary media and their networks
45 of communication.

46 One of the main categories and concerns of the
47 submitted articles has been the environmental and
48 ecological, and in OS 22(1) we presented three over-
49 views of the subject. Here we continue with another

three that present specific projects. Brona Martin gives
a summary of soundscape-based approaches and
discusses various projects that engage directly with
communities, such as those undergoing ‘regeneration
and renewal’, often with deleterious effects, as well as
those involved in political protest. Teresa Connors and
Andrew Denton have a lengthy history of collabora-
tion on environmentally themed projects in various
countries, and their article offers nuanced insights into
the evolution of their collective practices grounded by
being ‘in’ these environments. Carolyn Philpott
provides a comprehensive documentation of the work
of sound artist Cheryl Leonard that is based on and in
the Antarctic, a touchstone environment related to
climate change, and discusses Leonard’s efforts to
balance the aesthetic with the ethical in her work.

Next, we have two papers that deal with the
materiality of real-world contexts, the first by Diogo
Alvim who explores the interdisciplinary connections
between architectural thinking and practice and
music creation, using such concepts as material, site,
drawing, programme and use, both historically and in
current compositional work. This kind of analysis
highlights the need to distinguish the traditional visual
approach to space and architecture from the aural
experience of ‘acoustic space’ (Truax 2017) that is
implicitly or directly involved in all the compositional
work discussed here. Otso Lähdeoja addresses an
even more literal form of materiality, namely trans-
mitting sound through physical objects, or what he
terms ‘materially mediated electronic musicianship’.
These two papers, taken together, remind us that
sound as vibration is inherently influenced by every
stage of transfer of the source excitation to medium
of propagation, including the physical space into
which it is projected. Although we often refer to the
electroacoustically reproduced sound (source) as
disembodied, in practice it is just as ‘embodied’ as
acoustic sound.

Organised Sound over the last two decades has
established itself as a forum for an emerging musico-
logy of electroacoustic music that has been expanding
to include a wider range of concerns and practices. The
following articles present three different approaches to
the analysis of specific composers’ works by authors
with musicological and other backgrounds. Erik
DeLuca analyses the environmentally inspired work of

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John Luther Adams, asking what concept of ‘nature’ it represents. He also poses the more incisive question: ‘What is self-critical environmental sonic art?’, just as Gregg Wagstaff asked, more than 15 years ago, what is acoustic ecology’s ‘ecology’ (Wagstaff 1999), a topic also addressed by Jonathan Gilmurray in the OS 22(1) issue. The call for this issue included gender concerns in composition, a topic that has been consistently raised by Hannah Bosma (2017) with regard to electro-vocal music. So, I was somewhat surprised that the only submission in this category was Danielle Sofer’s analysis of my own work, *Song of Songs* (1994). As guest editor, this might seem awkward, but I am pleased it is included, given the scarcity of electro-acoustic work concerning sexual identity. As an interesting example of an expanding musicology, Nimalan Yoganathan and Owen Chapman have contributed a fascinating comparison of the Jamaican dub music of King Tubby with the compositional methods of soundscape composers, providing insight into the highly contextual basis for the creation and consumption of a popular form of music that they argue is more innovative than the commercial norms. Whereas popular music studies and ethnomusicology would probably only analyse this music according to its ‘style’, these authors emphasise its contextual roots.

Finally, we include three practice-based articles that document work from different geographical contexts and artistic approaches. As mentioned earlier, Matilde Meireles extends the phonographic approach to sonic documentation with multi-sensory elements of her installations in Brazil and Belfast. Guillaume Campion and Guillaume Côté describe a musical form of documentary that blends acousmatic techniques with the more traditional sound (or radio) documentary, in this case through their creation of a half-hour piece concerning the Montréal waterfront. Finally, Iain Findlay-Walsh discusses his self-reflexive approach to autoethnography, or what he calls a ‘self-narrative’ that represents the recordist of the work in the work, not necessarily by running commentary.

Based on these two sets of articles on context-based creation, we might ask what is still missing and where might this type of work lead? Given that there appears to be no limit to what aspects of our world an artist

might engage with, it may be risky to suggest any boundary to this emerging genre that seems to inspire a wide range of practitioners. I’ve mentioned a lack of gender-based approaches, but the real absence is the lack of artistically informed work that deals with broader social issues. Of course, environmental issues, a current concern of many artists today, have been referred to extensively, but the projects in these articles have tended to go in one direction: real-world contexts informing the art, rather than artistic practice being applied to other social issues. This is not surprising since creative artists want to focus on their own work, and in many cases, see it possibly changing listeners’ awareness. However, if artists are also sufficiently trained in the science and social science of sound as broadly as possible, their perceptual, musical and technological training may provide them with skills that can be applied to issues broader than purely artistic production. I have argued this point elsewhere in terms of ‘acoustic sustainability’ (Truax 2012) but there is much more to be explored in this area. Let us hope to see further developments of this topic in future issues of the journal.

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