

# HETEROPHONICS

Stuart Marshall

Performed by Nicolas Collins, Jane Harrison and Stuart Marshall at 2B, Butlers Wharf, Shad Thames, London SE1 on Saturday 18 December 1976. Night.

The piece was alternatively called "Idiophonics" in some advanced publicity so we must assume that either Stuart changed his mind about the title or the piece has two names. "Idiophonics", of course, conveys the notion of < ideas through sound > where "Heterophonics" is a more precise nomenclature for the piece as performed implying a multiplicity of sounds in space. The piece itself was relatively minimal and simple enough to describe: the three performers began back to back in the centre of the large empty space. Each of them had one wood-block – each block of a different but close pitch – and one hard beater. The playing of the blocks was not scored; it assumed a fairly leisurely pace yet remained taut throughout due to the eternal surprise of a woodblock sound and the marginal overlaps and tense silences that seemed to spread a net over the room. At a coincidence of sounds the performers would move some paces forward, thus radiating out from the central point towards the corners. The effects of this were threefold: perception of pitch of each sound changed slightly according to their position; overall dynamic as well as specific amplitude changed quite dramatically as a recognisable process throughout the duration of this section of the piece; orientation to the sounds altered in a fairly complex way. This section of the performance was complete at the point when each player had reached their destination, i.e. the corner they faced at the beginning. Two of the players were as far from the audience as was possible in the space. One of them was actually in amongst the audience.

At this juncture they left the woodblocks and took aerosol klaxons (a kind of aerosol can which "sprays" out a ferocious honk – used in America for scaring off intruders and bears) out into the open air. The large wooden doors in the wall of 2B were thrown open to let in the freezing night and the sound of these horns braying out over the river. One of the players stayed close to the building, one moved along the river to the right and the third walked out over Tower Bridge. The sounds bounced back and forth in a most spectacular way for quite some time – after a little while most of the audience left the rather precarious platforms which jut from the doors and huddled around an electric fire. Conversations started up and the piece took on the dimensions of a social gathering punctuated by alternately mournful and strident honking from outside. Eventually the players returned and there was applause. Nicolas Collins then told a story about a time when the piece was played in Connecticut. The first sequence was performed in a concert hall. The players then left the concert hall and the audience stayed put. The sounds obviously became fainter and fainter until inaudible. They then sat in silence for 20 minutes. When the players finally returned they clapped enthusiastically. Despite the fact that the "audience" at Butlers Wharf had become a truly social gathering in the absence

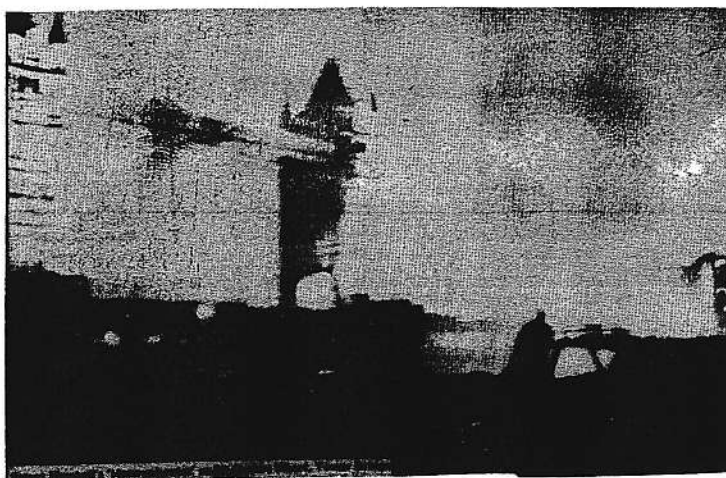


Photo: Dave Cunningham

of the performers their applause was in no sense ironic. Neither was it a stereotyped response since the sounds had obtruded into "their" space throughout. The factor of cold, too, had created a bond between all the people present, whether performers, lay audience, critics or friends. Almost everyone adjourned to a local pub shortly afterwards and continued their various conversations.

Stuart's work is fairly unique in this country. On the one hand his concern with sound as a malleable material and his "micro-structuring" (which gives the impression on a subjective level at least that his pieces have a loose form) aligns his work with much improvised music. On the other hand the minimal elements, the rather austere surface and the working through of an idea invites comparison with certain systems and process composers. Thirdly, of course, there is a definite structural concern with the actions of the performers, the alignment of the players in space being a conscious signifier to the same degree as their sound at a given point in time.

This rather isolated position must be due in part to his absolutist denial of the imposition of categorisation – a very worthy stance which leaves him somewhat immune to the frequently trivial dialectical struggles that inevitably occur within much contemporary music. Probably more significant though is his spell in the USA studying with the composer Alvin Lucier. It is composers like Lucier, specifically, and post-Fluxus LaMonte Young, to a lesser degree, who form the "art" context for Stuart's work. Other factors are his equivalence of activity in the field of video-art and a development of ideas within the intellectual context of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the radical semiologist Julia Kristeva (to inadequately define just two individuals). An intellectual position of this kind in combination with a laissez-faire or downright versatile approach to media implies a "cleverness" which is most definitely taboo in almost all current contemporary music. The disadvantages include the possibility that the type of individual most stringently loyal to a single organ of perception will fail to grasp the full dimensions of the work. This is especially the case with the video works, all of which use sound – whether speech or the breaking of a bottle – as a structural element

as opposed to customary usage as atmospheric or peripheral adjunct (a kind of snow on the windscreen). Anybody relegating the sound in these works to the threshold of perception will most definitely miss the point.

What then is the "point"? At first glance this type of piece might be regarded as an escape from time. Stuart states in his article "Alvin Lucier's Music of Signs in Space" 1: "Most music is spatially non-specific in notation and spatially asignifying in performance (in that performance aspires to an acoustic norm).

The music of Alvin Lucier makes a marked break with this tradition."

In actuality the tone of the article is not a denial of time but the establishment of space as a structural parameter. To further emphasise my earlier theme to the effect that Stuart's position is relatively unique this is a far different proposition to both the statement by Gavin Bryars: "I think that it's not necessary, really, to view experimental works in time..." 2 or my own statement that space, though decidedly a parameter of current relevant sound work can and should be subsumed through theoretic and praxis in both physical and linguistic terms by the dimension of time. 3 Certainly he is not concerned with the creation of sound-objects, whether it be the watercolours and Victorian lithographs of Experimental music or the grand canvas of symphonic work.

Above all, any music which takes the delineation of space as its prime factor is a proxemic music (this may seem tautological but I maintain that the double emphasis is essential since although all music signifies on a proxemic level it is only spatial, environmental and contextually informed musics which reflect the immediate social context of music production in their surface structure). A music which seeks to articulate a space with sound is not only proxemic in terms of externalisation – the performer delineating his environment by the outward flow of his actions – but also for interiorisation. A sound which defines a space is a sound which returns to a greater or lesser extent, and reflects the performed actions back into (in a psycho-physical sense) the performer. Of interest in this connection is the chapter – Echolocation by the blind – in the book "Listen in the

Dark"<sup>4</sup>. Stuart describes Alvin Lucier's latest work "Bird and Person Dyning" as focussing attention "literally on the position of the subject"<sup>1</sup> and in a more general sense this is also true of his own piece "Heterophonics". This is possibly a fragment of the "point" as derived from subjective experience as audience yet I imagine the work as being to some extent a trace or, more appropriately, the kind of trail left by those creatures which live just below the surface of the ocean bed. The deep structure of the work is extraordinarily rich and though the surface be severe the organisation — a construction through research and analysis — is engaging enough to maintain the attention upon its constituents. The means and effect of the ordering of this work can best be suggested by returning to the novel way in which time and space are explored in this type of work. To use both Stuart Marshall's and Alvin Lucier's words:

"Structuring in the musical or even communicational/syntactic sense of the ordering and combining in time of musical signs has been replaced by a concentration on the temporality of sound structures. 'Composition' has become irrelevant as he has turned his attention to 'the unleashing of natural phenomena that have to have their own time to develop.'

This is a new notion of musical temporality which is intrinsically linked to musical space."<sup>1</sup>

#### References

1. Studio International. November/December 1976. Stuart Marshall — "Alvin Lucier's Music of Signs in Space"
2. *ibid*  
Gavin Bryars in Michael Nyman — "Hearing/Seeing"
3. *ibid*  
David Toop — "Radical Structure: 2"
4. Griffin, R. Donald. "Listening in the Dark" Dover Publications Inc., New York 1974.

David Toop

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# EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE BRUCE WOOD

London Film Coop  
Wednesday 26-January

Briefly, the first show of the evening: Thom Andersen's "Eadweard Muybridge, zoopraxographer" (US, 1974; edited by Morgan Fisher). Made, according to the credits, in partial fulfilment of a college degree, the film documents in a straightforward and conventional manner — drawing mainly from Muybridge's own photographs — his work, initially as a landscape and documentary photographer, his murder of his wife's lover

(for which he was acquitted), his photographic studies of animal and human locomotion, his attempts at projecting moving images, etc. .

But the major part of the film is taken up with showing a selection of the several thousand photographic series he took of humans in an enormous variety of movements, ranging from everyday tasks to acrobatics: in addition there are a number of series of the movements of severely handicapped people. In common with two other documentaries I have seen on Muybridge, this film insists on animating the photographic records but, in this case, with the addition of gratuitous music (which extends throughout the entire film): however, apart from the fact that less than one thirtieth of the original movement appears on the records, animating the photographs contradicts the very analysis of movement Muybridge was trying to achieve.

The film concludes by pointing an accusing finger at Muybridge, suggesting that he had less than respect for his human subjects by treating them anonymously in his data and by making them degrade themselves in front of the camera: but here the film fails to put Muybridge's attitudes — and indeed his whole work — in the context of the scientific tradition of his time.

In the second show that evening, Bruce Wood from Chicago showed, in chronological order, eight recent films, all of which were black and white and silent. In order of showing they were: *Latex Sky*; *River of Stars* (both 1975); *Arctic Desire*; *Silver Traces*; *Airless Passage*; *Island Design*; *Edge Forces*; *Molten Shadow* (all 1976).

The basic material for these films was either overtly abstract — hard-edge streaks, violent blurs, splashes of black on white — or an abstraction derived from film of real objects/events — grass, reflections on water, rivers, chosen presumably because of their relative non-specificity — though transformation in order to distance them from their original reality (most often by a simple positive-negative reversal). Throughout the sequence of films, a certain tension is maintained by oscillating around the border between what is abstract and what can be referred back to its source — a concern which is reflected in Wood's choice of titles: *Molten Shadow*; *River of Stars*; *Latex Sky*, for example.

But it is the complex assembling of this material both within and across time which is Wood's main concern. "River of Stars", "Silver Traces" and "Airless Passage" in particular deal more with the assembling of images within time and the resultant superimpositions, some lattice-like, others which tease the eye from one layer to another: but most interesting are those which, especially in "Silver Traces", appear to interact with the film surface itself. Almost without exception both hard vibrating abstract images and softer, slower, sustained images exist within the one film but one may well overcome the other as, for instance, in "Arctic Desire" where the latter predominate. In the later films, "Island Design" and "Modern Shadow" it is the assemblage over time which has become more important.

However two factors seem to work against the ultimate success of these films: the first is Wood's almost total concern with the decorative qualities of the end-product; the second is that, given effect as the most important variable, there is a lack of differentiation and lack of systematic investigation along this variable.

Jeremy Spencer

## BACKBONE ✓

A film by Tom Braidwood, presented by Ellie Epp in a programme of films from Vancouver at the Film Co-op on 19th January.

"concerned with sublimation, mechanization, and liberation: the violence of perception and the perception of violence." (Tom Braidwood)

In black and white, with a synthesized soundtrack except over the first group of shots — the title shot, a grainy close-up, hard to read, perhaps part of the second shot, the head of a statue of a woman (an angel) surrounded by carved leaves, then a group of gravestones, two views of a derelict barn, some cows, and pigs running. The sound here was slow string notes.

What followed visually was archive material — only four shots used, but to intense effect. The first, about a 3-second shot of a burial group lowering a loosely-built coffin into a grave to rest sloping against the edge, was repeated about a dozen times.

Then an extraordinary sequence. Two shots, probably less than one second each (essential to the mental-effect produced) alternated some 50 or more times. One was a low upward medium close-up of an officer facing left yelling a word with right arm upraised; the other was of a shell casing bursting smoking from the rear barrel end of an early 20th century field cannon tended by soldiers in broad tin helmets — after the repetitions we knew just what we'd seen! The rapid alternation induced very individual patterns of successive responding activity in the audience: optical dazzlement, visual recognition, emotional reactions, conceptual responses, daze, suspense in anticipating change, restlessness, amusement, and renewed interest. Under conceptual responses is classed an open-ended activity of sign-decoding of the juxtaposed pair as 'act of war', 'automatic obedience', 'energetic actions', 'military dehumanisation', 'mechanical aggression', 'patriotic stamina' etcetera. Deliberate exploration of the two images is an uphill climb because the eyes are repeatedly jerked back to the officer's mouth and to the blown-out casing with its puff of smoke — the two elements of strong in-frame motion.

But this sequence is also structured by its soundtrack, a vibrating electronic note alternating with an explosive roar. Each is slightly (half a frame?) shorter than each shot, so that a slow phase change between sound cuts and picture cuts takes place. The brain reads "Fire!" and "Powghh!" into the noises, but gradually the advance of sound against picture becomes detectable, then pronounced so that each mode switches alternately; then they re-merge and the imaginary sound-images are restored in reverse so that the officer's shout is an explosive bark and the gun noise a synthesized 'recoil' effect.

When completely synchronized again the sequence ends and we break into a close street shot of a woman rushing up to kiss a marching soldier; she dashes on and is frozen, for many seconds, a silhouette with one hand reaching towards two more marchers behind, the other arm bent with a finger curled. We feel a liberation from the incessance of the last two or more minutes. The freeze-frame suddenly re-starts into motion and the film is over with a rush.

Andrew D. Nicolson