EXPLORING ELECTRONIC MUSIC HERITAGE THROUGH ETHICS AND IMPROVISATION

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HISTORICALLY INFORMED DESIGN OF SOUND SYNTHESIS

A multidisciplinary, structured approach to the digitisation and exploration of electronic music heritage

DATATON-02.JPG
HISTORICALLY INFORMED SOUND SYNTHESIS

A collection of electronic instruments used by composers in Sweden during the 1960's and 70's collected by the Swedish Performing Arts Agency (Musikverket) and archived by the Performing Arts Museum (Scenkonstmuseet).
IMPROVISATION AS A METHOD

Michel Foucault's volume 3 of his *History of Sexuality.*
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• for understanding these systems

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IMPROVISATION AS A METHOD

• for understanding these systems
• ethics as a means to navigate the complex interrelations that are embedded.

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TODO TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT
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• increasing rate of development
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- increasing rate of development
- turning even new objects incompatible
TODO TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

• increasing rate of development
• turning even new objects incompatible
• what is lost in the process?
EXAMINE CULTURAL HERITAGE
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  ▪ objects with which contemporary ideas and trends are exploited
EXAMINE CULTURAL HERITAGE
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- attempt to approach them with taking into account their cultural, social and political affordances.
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• historically informed performances and re-enactments made possible
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• historically informed performances and re-enactments made possible
• identify existing biases
HISTORICALLY INFORMED PERFORMANCE PRACTICE
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- one in which improvisation participates in altering the practice
HISTORICALLY INFORMED PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

- may reveal hidden features
- one in which improvisation participates in altering the practice
- and the practice is being altered
THE DATATON

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- or both

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INVENTIVE DESIGN FORGOTTEN?

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- standardization and market forces excludes unsuccessful features
- on one particular functionality determines the future development
TOWARD A NEW ORGANOLOGY

An attempt to understand an instrument should include:

Compare a cembalo with a sampler playing a cembalo sound
TOWARD A NEW ORGANOLOGY

An attempt to understand an instrument should include:

• its design and functionality

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TOWARD A NEW ORGANOLOGY

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- whatever agency it has or had

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TOWARD A NEW ORGANOLOGY

An attempt to understand an instrument should include:

• its design and functionality
• whatever agency it has or had
• what kind of music was meant to be played on this instrument.

Compare a cembalo with a sampler playing a cembalo sound
EVERY INSTRUMENT HAS CONTEXT

Swedish organist and pianist Karl Erik Welin playing *Rendez-Vous 1963* by Théodore E. Libèr

He dismantles a piano with a chain saw - but even this way of "playing" the piano relies on the instrument's history and context

*Wiggen (1972) De två musikkulturerna, Sveriges Radio.*
WITH ELECTRONIC INSTRUMENTS IT MAY BE HARDER

Finding out the particular associations the instrument provides may be difficult.

Dataton is a good example (see Holzer, Holzapfel & Frisk (2021) Sounds of Futures Passed: Media Archaeology and Design Fiction as NIME Methodologies)
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- musical
- technical
- the growing gap between them

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THE
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- many hidden layers (instrument builders, musicians, editors are often neglected)
- increasing speed in the 20th Century
- with the introduction of electronic instruments: it's a mess

(Transformations: study of cultural traditions in constant change)
WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE THEN?

What is the difference between the traditional method for musical interpretation and the excavation of the technological and cultural significances of a particular electronic musical instrument of the past?

Isn't it just the same thing?

(see Roland Barthes in the famous essay /The death of the Author/)
THE OBJECT IS NOT THE PRIMARY INTEREST (MUSICOLEGY)

It could be: *There is nothing outside of the object* to paraphrase Derrida. The object can tell os a great many things.
THE ART WORK IS NOT THE PRIMARY INTEREST (EXPLORATION OF MUSIC HISTORY)

Nor is my sole interest an artistically driven project where the end goal is a work

- at the centre of the work there is an author
THE INTERACTIONS ARE THE PRIMARY INTEREST

It is the interactions that are made possible by engaging in an artistically driven play with the objects:

• a free play with no particular meaning

In this free play I can engage with certain questions in a way that would otherwise not have been possible. Improvisation is part of the method that allows me to do this.
THE DIFFERENCE

between the musicological model and the historically informed exploration of a electronic music heritage:

first has an origin (the composer) and the second supports a network of relations that includes an originator but does not necessarily privilege them
A NETWORK OF RELATIONS

The added value: it opens up for an expanded ethical dimension of artistic practices
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• is not normative
• proposes how one may understand something one already does

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FOUCAULT: PRACTICES OF FREEDOM

It is a particular development between self and others that is at the core, similar to Foucault's notion of the care of the self, a self that is rooted in "practices of freedom"
PRACTICES OF FREEDOM

*Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.*

Foucault further makes possible an artistic evaluation of the investigation of old instruments:

*Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.*

CONCLUSION

As long as I care about the relation between myself and the instrument, and the instruments relation to its context, I can be free to follow my artistic and ethically informed intentions, and these will develop into a sort of freedom in and of themselves.
ETHICS OF INSTRUMENTS?

The concept of an *ethics of instruments* is explored by Tresch & Dolan
ETHICS OF INSTRUMENTS?

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1. ontology
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1. ontology
2. deontology
3. ascetis
4. teleology of ethical relations.
ETHICS OF INSTRUMENTS?

The care of the self is rather the activity of which these elements are a part.
THE CARE OF THE SELF AS PRACTICE

The care of the self is not a solipsitic activity that is focused on ones physical body or individuality
THE CARE OF THE SELF

When you take care of the body you do not take care of the self. The self is not clothing, tools, or possessions; it is to be found in the principle that uses these tools, a principle not of the body of the soul. You have to worry about your soul—that is the principal activity for caring for yourself. The care of the self is the care of the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance.
THE CARE OF THE SELF AS PRACTICE

The principle that uses the tools of artistic practice is in essence the aesthetics of the creative act: the practice itself.
THE CARE OF THE SELF: FOCUS ON THE WORLD AROUND ME
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- through these connections significant knowledge is developed
ETHICAL SPECIFICITITES (TRESCH AND DOLAN)

The idea of an *ethics of instruments* is leaning on the notion that the material aspects, mediations and the telos of an instrument can provide grounds for an analysis of its *ethics*.

It may appear odd to speak of ethics in relation to dead objects when not even alive objects are ethically treated.
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Their main interest here is to use their framework to study historical instruments, both musical and scientific.

Main ideas:

- ethics guides the pursuit of knowledge
- understandings of the self are part of the knowledge formation
IMPROVISATION DEVELOPS NETWORKS
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- rooted in a relational ontology
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EPISTEMIC VIRTUES

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• Again, related to Foucault Foucault's thinking who depicted an ontological difference between knowledge of the self and care of the self, and between the care of the self and ethics.
AN ETHICS OF INSTRUMENTS AGAIN
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- instrument is anthropomorphized in the process of considering its ethics
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- even though the instrument has agency, on the surface level it still lacks the will and the freedom that a human possesses
- an objection situated in a dualist view of the world, but traditional laws of causality enforce this view.
DISTINCT VIEWS OF THE INSTRUMENT
1. THE OBJECT IN AN OF ITSELF

There is a state but no process
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- observable properties and interfaces

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- it is playable

There is a state but no process
1. THE OBJECT IN AN OF ITSELF

- observable properties and interfaces
- it is a musical instrument
- it is playable
- it belongs to a historic era

There is a state but no process
2. THE OBJECT IS PART OF AN EPISTEMIC NETWORK

The causal relations in this network are contributing to both the knowledge in the system and to its output.
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- the interface allows for something
- strong causality
- player has control

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DISTINCT SYSTEMS AND VIEWS

The second is where knowledge may be developed as a result of the developing relations and that whatever knowledge there is rests on the ethics of these relations.
IS THERE AN ETHICS OF INSTRUMENTS
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IS THERE AN ETHICS OF INSTRUMENTS

- focus instead on the usefulness of an ethical perspective of the instrument
- between a musician and a Dataton module it would be fair to say that the ethics of the human extends to the instrument
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- makes the ethics of the situation useful to consider, artistically as well as from a heritage point of view.
PAST AND PRESENT CONNECTIONS
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• the musician has to adhere to the materiality of the instrument
PAST AND PRESENT CONNECTIONS

• the musician has to adhere to the materiality of the instrument
• and to all other past and present connections
PAST AND PRESENT CONNECTIONS

• the musician has to adhere to the materiality of the instrument
• and to all other past and present connections
• this activity is part of the care of the self
SUMMARY
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• thinking about an ethics of instruments may be a useful theoretical construct in organology
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• this presents us with a possible conceptual problem that was always present
SUMMARY

- ethics as a mode of subjectification the transformation into a subject happens through certain practices, technologies of the self, that depart from the individual will to care for oneself
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• ethics as a mode of subjectification the transformation into a subject happens through certain practices, technologies of the self, that depart from the individual will to care for oneself
• rooted in an aesthetics of existence and will not function as a code exposed on an object from the outside
SUMMARY
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• improvisation, is the proper method for investigating this ethics of practice
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• it can provide us access to important knowledge about the instruments
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• it can provide us access to important knowledge about the instruments
• this knowledge transcends biographical information
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• it is through new connections that it is conveyed
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• it is not the art object that represents the knowledge (though it could be), it is the doing or art
• it is still the way that the network grows that has the epistemological potential
THANK YOU!