



shlom.com

| [biography](#) | | [works](#) | | [performances](#) | | [listen](#) | | [watch](#) | | [other](#) |

Real World Sound in Relational Music

This talk was first given at the University of Bristol in December 2014.

Later in this talk I'll present two examples of my work that combine instrumental music with recorded sound. But before I get there I want to first establish a broader context through considering recent works by Joanna Bailie and Johannes Kreidler and exploring some frameworks for how we might think about such work.

I'll begin by exploring the idea of Relational Music, a term coined by German music philosopher Harry Lehman. He has published various articles on the topic, but I'm drawing on a lecture he gave at the 2014 Darmstadt Summer Course. In this lecture Lehmann divides Western Art music over the past century into four stages: (1) Classical Modernism; (2) the Avant-garde; (3) Post-modernism; and (4) Contemporary Art. The final stage, Contemporary Art, is the one we are living in now and in music this stage is defined by relational practices. I won't summarise the first three stages of Lehmann's history, as most of the ideas are not directly relevant to my topic, but you can see the lecture online.

An aspect of Lehmann's history that is relevant here is the distinction he draws between classical modernism and the avant-garde. For Lehmann, classical modernism was defined by the rejection of the classical age and tonality, which led to the creation of new musical materials and new ways of organising sound, such as the twelve-tone method. The traditional understanding of the artwork, however, was unchallenged. Music was still concerned with *sounds and forms* (sounds organized in time). In contrast, the avant-garde was defined by a rejection of both the work concept and a traditional understanding of a given medium. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is the quintessential avant-garde visual artwork. *Fountain* is a 'readymade'; an ordinary manufactured object designated by the artist as a work of art, in this case, a standard urinal, laid flat on its back. *Fountain* rejected the notion of what was usually considered to constitute an artwork, not least because it doesn't reflect any technical

skill on the part of the artist. In music, Lehmann suggests that George Brecht's *String Quartet* (1961) is an early example of an avant-garde musical piece. In Brecht's work the players don't use their instruments, but rather engage in hand-shaking.

Lehmann's thesis is that the pursuits of classical modernism – looking for new sounds and ways of organising those sounds – continued to dominate contemporary classical music until the end of the twentieth century, and that the avant-garde principles of negating the work concept and medium, that were so central to developments in the visual arts in the 1960s and 1970s, have only now become centrally important within music during our present Contemporary Art phase. He also argues that material progress is now dead: put simply, after Cage and Lachenmann, there are no more sounds to be found. And in turn, that for 'new music' to maintain its core value of newness, the search for novel music material has been replaced by a search for novel relationships between music and ideas, which is what he means by Relational Music. I'll now play extracts of works by two composers that might fit this definition of Relational Music.

Klikk for å bruke Flash 

JOANNA BAILIE: ARTIFICIAL ENVIRONMENTS 1-5, NUMBER 3

Bailie's piece is relational in the most concrete of ways: it's clear that we would experience the sounds very differently without the text. I think of the work as a kind of science fiction, imagining worlds where sound behaves differently. I'll say more about this work later.

The extreme end of Relational Music is Conceptual Music. For Lehmann, Conceptual Music is the arrival of the avant-garde within new music, 60 years later. He says: Duchamp made non-retinal and non-aesthetic visual art and finally with Conceptual Music we have non-cochlear and non-aesthetic music. One example he gives is Johannes Kreidler's audio-visual work *Charts Music*, where the composer translates statistical graphs of corporation stock prices into pitch contours and then used the software programme Microsoft Songsmith to create an automated harmonization.

Johannes Kreidler - Charts Music - Songsmith f...



In Lehmann's terms, Bailie's work is relational, but it's not conceptual because it is 'still' aesthetic. I understand aesthetic in this context to mean *providing pleasure through sound*. For Lehmann, *Charts Music* is not aesthetic because like Duchamp's *Fountain*, **the idea is everything**. I agree Duchamp's urinal is non-aesthetic, in the sense that seeing it 'live' doesn't add much. But I disagree that the same is true of *Charts Music*: I think hearing a description of *Charts Music* and experiencing it live are different. It seems to me that *Fountain* is NON-AESTHETIC, whereas *Charts Music* is BAD-AESTHETIC, in the sense that part of its charm is in its 'bad' musical practice.

Lehmann argues that Relational Music signifies a turn against absolute music through bringing back relationships with extra-musical information. I wonder if Relational Music is simply the contemporary manifestation of the representational side of the age-old abstraction *versus* representation aesthetic debate. In these terms Relational Music is on the same side of the debate as *Seconda prattica* from the early 17th century, and the New German School conception of Programme Music from the mid 19th century.

The debate between *Prima Pratica* and *Seconda Pratica* concerned vocal music. The dispute was over whether text should follow musical 'logic', or music should follow textual meaning. Crudely put, in *Prima Pratica* musical practice was paramount, whereas in *Seconda Pratica* the basis of musical choices was to amplify textual meaning. In *Prima Pratica* dissonances are prepared and resolved in codified ways relating to musical practice, without regard for the meaning of the text; within *Seconda Pratica* dissonances are employed expressively to amplify textual meaning – dissonances amplify the expressively licentious. The debate between Programme Music and Absolute Music concerned instrumental music. Proponents of Programme Music argued that instrumental music should be heard in relation to an extra-musical element. This extra-musical element was typically a narrative (e.g. Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*) or an image (e.g. Debussy's *La Mer*) and importantly this

element was explicitly told to the audience through the work's title or in a programme note; a composer who secretly represents the ocean in their work, but does **not** tell the audience, is not writing programme music.

Like *Prima Pratica*, Relational Music is not only concerned with purely musical matters. And like Programme Music, a work can only be termed Relational Music if it explicitly sets up terms of reference with something from the world.

How is Relational Music different from earlier manifestations of representational music? I see Relational Music as different to Programme Music both in terms of the kinds of subjects it engages, and also in the attitude with which it does that engaging. Whereas Berlioz represents a story of a man taking an opium trip as a response to unreturned love, Kreidler's work addresses the recent global financial crisis. And whereas Berlioz's intention is to amplify the scenic and emotional aspects of the narrative through music, Kreidler's 1:1 mode of representation (pitches corresponding to stock market graphs) is entirely unexpressive and a knowingly absurd mode of representation. Bailie's work speculatively engages with sound itself, asking us to imagine acoustic conditions that are different to the ones we know. And unlike programme music, where the extra-musical element is communicated via the title or programme note, here the extra-musical information is *communicated in the work itself*, with the spoken text playfully submitted to the same acoustical principles as the non-textual sound. The mode of representation is not a given, but rather something that is engaged. Perhaps we can say: in Programme Music the relationship between music and external idea is consonant, whereas in Relational Music the relationship is in some sense dissonant.

I'll return to the idea of Relational Music later, when I come to my own work, but I'd like to now consider some theories about listening to provide a perceptual framework for composition incorporating real world recorded sound. One issue I have with Lehmann's thesis is that it seems to presuppose that musical sounds, ideas and structures are somehow autonomously immanent within the work themselves. In considering listening here, I am drawing on the ideas of Pierre Schaeffer and the development of those ideas in the writings of Michel Chion and Dennis Smalley.

In the everyday, we often listen to **gather information**. Here our attention is on the event attached to the sound, e.g. someone climbing stairs. We are not interested in the sound itself, but the information it conveys (the person climbing the stairs is trying not to be heard). Sometimes we also listen passively and unintentionally. We cannot help hearing something because of its impact, suddenness, or unusual features (e.g. the person loudly climbs the stairs, distracting us from our thoughts). Another type of listening is what Chion calls **semantic listening**, which we experience when we listen to language: we listen to "interpret a message".

The intentional process of directing our attention towards appreciating the sounding shape and ignoring any meaning sounds might contain was what Schaeffer called **reduced listening**. This is a common experience within a musical context, but it's also possible to exercise in the everyday (for instance, appreciating the resonance that results from the person climbing the stairs). In his compositions, Schaeffer was primarily concerned with abstracting recorded sounds for reduced listening. He

wanted to direct attention away from the semantic and contextual meanings of sounds and draw attention to inherent musical qualities. I feel differently: I use recorded real world sound to both draw attention to different ways of listening and utilise them compositionally. I am attracted by the idea that a recording of someone climbing stairs presented within an electroacoustic composition offers so many possibilities depending on other sound events within the piece and the organisation of those events. A recording of the stair climbing could connect to the tempo of a live flute part, or to other recordings that also refer to the notion of transport. It also might appear a number of times and establish listening expectations. E.g. if the first three times it appeared it was followed by a recording of a dog barking, we might expect the same on the fourth appearance.

I'll shortly present two examples of my work that combine instrumental music with recorded sound and explore how my work is relational through its incorporation of real world recorded sound. I first need to make a disclaimer: for Lehmann, Relational Music seems to only denote work that combines sound with another media, such as the text in Bailie's work or the video in Kreidler's work. I'd like to make the case that purely sonic works – and here I am excluding spoken language from the sonic realm – can also be relational when they involve recordings of real world sound that are clearly recognisable. My argument is that such recordings engage the information gathering mode of perception where we are not interested in the sound itself, but the information it conveys. I think a recording of someone climbing stairs conveys similar information to a textual description or visual depiction of someone climbing stairs. Likewise, we know that images of war combined with *tragic* music will be perceived differently to the same visual sequence combined with *jovial* music, and I think a similar kind of contrast would be achieved by coupling a recording of war sound with *tragic* music as opposed to coupling it with *jovial* music. Each medium conveys information in different ways, but nonetheless my point is simply that recognisable recorded sound can engage the real world just as powerfully as textual and visual means.

I'll shortly play the first movement of my piece *Popular Contexts*, a 32 minute work, set in six movements, for one keyboardist playing piano and sampler keyboard. The work explores ways in which real-world sound constructs contextual frames for instrumental music, and vice versa. In this movement, I only use five pitches on the piano, each of which is coupled to a sample. For example, each time a D-flat is played on the piano it is coupled with a drum-beat; likewise E-flat is coupled with war sounds from a computer game. In a sense, I created a new musical instrument, which we could call a relational musical instrument. I'll now play the movement before making some further remarks.

Klikk for å bruke Flash 

POPULAR CONTEXTS: FREE SOUND

Mark Knoop, studio recording

In choosing each of these five samples, I wanted recordings that were clearly recognisable: a drumbeat, war sounds, train announcement, pingpong and a slurp. In contrast to the homogeneity of the piano, I also wanted five recordings that were both sonically and semantically heterogeneous. And most importantly, I wanted recordings

where the perception or meaning changed over time. For example, when heard for one beat the sample coupled to the piano G-flat produces a single bell sound, but when held a little longer you hear three bells that form an arpeggiated triad, and when held longer again this arpeggio becomes the sonic marker preceding a train station announcement. The table tennis recording works in a different way: when heard for a single beat, the sound largely acts as a notional signifier of table tennis as an idea, whereas when it is allowed to play for some seconds listening may be directed towards a more abstract mode, appreciating the sonic qualities of the ball being hit back and forth.

Within the piano part, I also wanted to create a shift - a harmonic surprise - through the introduction of the fourth and fifth pitches. It begins with three notes – D-flat, E-flat and G-flat - that suggest scale degrees 1, 2 and 4 in a D-flat tonality, but the introduction of A-flat, and later B-flat, reveals an archetypal pentatonic pitch set. I mean ‘archetypal’ within a Western context: this is a pitch set commonly used to allude to the Far East in film and music theatre. I reinforce this allusion through the nature of the melodic line in the final part of the movement.

The second example I will play for you is called *Jazz in the park*. It’s the second movement of a four-movement work for ensemble and sampler keyboard. I’ll play it before saying anything, as I’m curious to know if my intention corresponds with your experience.

Klikk for å bruke Flash 

JAZZ IN THE PARK

asamisimasa, live recording

My idea was to create a ten-second real world scene that involved music within it: a jazz band playing at a park. But I wanted to construct this scene, layer by layer, by separating out each sonic element: the layers of the ‘park’ (birds, background traffic, people talking, an ice-cream van) and each instrumental layer (guitar, double bass, organ, drum-kit). At first these layers are presented in isolation, alternating between a recorded element and a musical part. As the movements progresses I increasingly superimpose the recorded elements to construct the park scene, and in juxtaposition I superimpose the layers of the band. And eventually I superimpose all of the layers, placing the music into the park scene. My hope was to create a scene that sounds natural, but that the construction process reveals that in fact it is artificial.

Before I move on from this example, I’d like to explain my thinking behind the clarinet part in the first two-thirds of the movement. Here the clarinet plays just two notes: a high ‘A’ that follows each recording, and a low ‘G’ that follows each instrumental statement. In the first place, these two notes simply serve to help delineate the structure. As I said, the high ‘A’s follow each ‘park’ recording, and the low ‘G’s follow each instrumental statement. The high ‘A’ is rather piercing and perhaps annoying. This is intentional. More than simply supporting structural delineation, which could have been achieved with a less annoying note choice, I chose this high piercing note to create a kind of distancing effect. I hope that it gives the work a kind of clinical focus that encourages a kind of clinical listening, where attention is drawn to the process rather than simply the content of the various sonic materials. And finally,

by giving the clarinet this reductive and purely functional role, I'm able to create a moment of surprise (and one that relieves the irritation!) in the final part where the clarinet shifts into a musical role as the soloist of the band.

In these two examples, I have tried to show how my work incorporating recordings within an instrumental context might be situated within Lehmann's definition of Relational Music. In the first example, *Free Sound*, my idea was to create a composite musical instrument, where each piano pitch is coupled to a various samples of recognisable real world sound. And in *Jazz in the park*, I tried to construct a real world scene with a musical component in it, which compositionally presents and treats the recorded non-musical sound and the live instrumental sound in the same way. I've also tried to show that I am motivated to create musical works that incorporate recordings to draw attention to different ways of listening and utilise them compositionally.

I will conclude by returning to Lehmann's proposition; although I have made a few divergent comments along the way, I'd like to now offer a more fulsome critique. Lehmann's proposition is based on a grand narrative and like all grand narratives it is reductive and exclusionary. From within Western Art notated music, it seems to exclude the work of significant figures like Feldman or Kagel that do not easily fit within these models and historical trajectories. And by being solely concerned with notated music, it also excludes equally significant innovations that have taken place within other musical practices, such as free improvisation or electronica. There is also the inference that a composer today not engaging with relational-practices is out of step with time and historical necessity. The inference is that all 'abstract' compositions for string quartet composed today are simply old fashioned and irrelevant. I don't agree. At the core of Lehmann's thesis is the idea that for new music to retain its newness the search for novel music material must be replaced by a search for novel relationships between music and ideas. Even if it were true that there are no more new materials to be found, I think this viewpoint misses a fundamentally important point: new music was never just about finding new sounds, it was also about finding new ways of organising those sounds, which in turn construct new kinds of listening experiences for audiences. I am quite sure that has not been exhausted and that it remains equally possible to innovate within abstract and relational contexts. More importantly, I think most interesting music engages **both** the material and discursive, the abstract and the relational. I think these hard categories are the poles of a continuum which works lean towards, and I love works which change which way they lean during the work itself!