

**The Sublime in Acousmatic Music:
listening to the unpresentable**

By

John Levack Drever B.Mus, M.Mus

Research & Postgraduate Centre, Dartington College of Arts,
Totnes, Devon, TQ9 6EJ, UK

E-mail: j.drever@dartington.ac.uk

Fax: +44 (0)1803 863569

been shared among other listeners, albeit to different degrees and configurations. The woolly term that I am going to adopt for this feeling invoked by this theme is the sublime. In other words I want to propose that the sensation that has arisen in my consciousness (that I will describe in greater detail below) has something to do with the notion of the sublime.

Background

My acousmatic works explore a broad range of issues and approaches. Common to all the projects is that all the sounds used and presented at what ever stage of the process are either derived from field recordings or recorded in the studio, none are synthesised from scratch in the computer. Interdisciplinary collaboration has taken a key role in my compositions, working with a number of writers and performers, often with the intent to challenge and develop my musical language and conceptual underpinnings to art's practice, both in devising and performing. Many of my works are spoken word text based compositions, which take on the concerns of a poet. Other projects comprise of framing and/or juxtaposing found sounds with little to no retouching/ airbrushing, where the microphone takes the role of musical instrument. And some projects take minute samples to significantly long field recordings, which undergo significant transformation, where frequency, amplitude, duration, panning and envelope are interfered with. In such works sounds may be transformed to such a degree that there is no audible correspondence with the original sound, losing all trace of origins or context whilst gaining new identities and relationships.

From the outset of my exploration into the field of acousmatic music, my interest as a composer of the genre was primarily a representational one rather than an aesthetic one. All the sound-objects I was appropriating and manipulating had strong extrinsic meanings to me, once I had established their relationships intrinsically within the work. That is, once the process of recording and selecting sounds and their consequent physical transformations had been completed, the sounds adopted fixed meanings outside of themselves in my head, over and above merely a description of the phenomena itself. I was quick to mentally confuse representation with that of presentation. For me there was no meaningful difference. The presence of an electroacoustic sound could be as full, as immediate and as intimate as any acoustic sound. More recently my overriding interest in sound and its creative organisation has veered towards soundscape studies, where compositionally I am very much concerned with the original context of sounds and how sounds are practised in the everyday. Although I am presenting compositions now where

Interestingly notions of the sublime became popular in Europe during the Eighteenth Century with the translation of a study by

that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will

and the absolute through minimal action and content. There is continuous tension of 'nothing is going to happen' through out the interludes, where the experience of time is suspended and attenuated. The pendulum of past and future slows down and is still. A sonorous present is at hand. The moment we perceive its stillness, it is moving again into the future. The moment has passed. We experience all of this within the framing of the spoken voice and bird song, which underlines the absence in the interludes.

Through a reading of different notions of the sublime it is apparent that such concepts resonate deeply with my intuitive compositional process and can provide greater insight into the potential of such work.

Bibliography