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An Exploration in the Critical Analysis of Electroacoustic Music

"Electro-acoustic music seems driven by composers more interested in logical construction than by intuition." – Jon Appleton[1]

Composers, engineers, artists, and performers have spent the last century exploring ways in which electrical devices can assist in creating entirely new sound worlds for musical exploration. By the interdisciplinary nature of the field, this exploration has required knowledge not only of traditional musical practices but also topics such as computer science, electrical engineering, mathematics, and acoustics. Accordingly, much of the literature published on topics relating to electroacoustic music is technical in nature, including both scientific research and technical discussions of the generation or manipulation of electronic sound. There has also been some interest in developing "theories" of electroacoustic music: a body of writing concerned with the arrangement of sonic elements from the perspective of a composer creating a work or of a theorist analyzing a work. Combining these theoretical writings with the aforementioned technical writings, the majority of the scholarship within the field is concerned with the discussion of technical, theoretical, and aesthetic issues that are relevant to the *creation* of the work. Such writing oftentimes disregards or misrepresents the nature of the listening experience either due to oversight or due to an assumption that a listener will be able to perceive these compositional procedures and find them meaningful to their experience. Comparatively little has been written about the resulting pieces of music as *aesthetic objects* – works of art separated from their modes of production and underlying structures, and understood on their own terms. To borrow from the Jon Appleton quote found above, the scholarship of electroacoustic music seems driven by writers more interested in logical construction than in listening.

Leigh Landy has issued a call for greater triangulation (the use of feedback and evaluation) as a way to combat "what is called an 'island mentality' demonstrated by many individuals working in all areas of the sonic arts," implying that such scholarship demonstrates "a bias towards formalism and therefore much less of one towards the contextual, aesthetic, reception, etc."[2] Rather than continuing with Landy's proposed system of triangulation between composer, work, and audience, I propose in this paper the development of a discourse of electroacoustic music that de-emphasizes compositional procedure and the pre-compositional intentions of the composer and explores *the intentions of the work* as experienced between the work and the listener. The end goal of this project is not to construct any sort of broad theory that can apply to a range of electroacoustic compositions, but rather to acknowledge that a certain body of work has not been discussed in an appropriate manner, and to make a first attempt toward a meaningful discourse of these compositions, informed by careful listening. This listener-centered approach serves to counteract a perceived lack of critical engagement within the field, and is one step in my larger agenda of bringing electroacoustic music studies in line with larger trends within the field of musicology – particularly recent trends in the area of

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[1] Jon Appleton, "Musical Storytelling," *Contemporary Music Review* 15, Part 1 (1996): 67.
[2] Leigh Landy, "Reviewing the musicology of electroacoustic music: a plea for greater triangulation," *Organised Sound* 4, no. 1 (1999): 61.

music criticism. In this context, I adopt Lawrence Kramer's idea of music criticism as "the public record of our sustained, thoughtful involvement with some of the music we find moving, enlightening, provoking, oppressive, ambivalent, and more. Talking about music… is a means of investing that music with the very cultural values we also want to comprehend through it."[3]

I propose a model for the discourse of electroacoustic music that combines two main components both informed by careful listening: analysis and critical interpretation. This combination is referred to as "critical analysis." In beginning a critical analysis of an electroacoustic work, it will be imperative to include some discussion of the elements contained within the piece as appropriate – the sonic materials, form, motives, extra-musical signifiers, software tools, source code, etc. This is the *analysis* portion of the proposed critical model, where various analytical tools appropriate to the piece at hand may be utilized in order to describe and characterize relevant constituent parts. If analysis is defined as an elucidation of *what* is contained within a piece, perhaps critical interpretation may be defined as a discussion of what *may* be contained within a piece, or *why* certain elements may have been included by the composer or perceived by the listener in a particular way. The *critical interpretation* portion of this project serves to reinforce my belief in a similarity between the referentiality and thus the perception of certain (primarily acousmatic) electroacoustic compositions and works of literature. Thus, I have turned to methodologies from the field of literary theory.

Why Literary Theory?

The discipline of literary theory (or simply "theory") has undergone many advances during the past century, with musicologists and music theorists only recently taking advantage of said efforts. Jonathan Culler has detailed four main points of "theory," each of which resonate with the goals of this project and the desire to incorporate additional scholarship into the toolbox of electroacoustic music analysis:

1. Theory is interdisciplinary – discourse with effects outside an original discipline.
2. Theory is analytical and speculative – an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject.
3. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural.
4. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices.[4]

In short, literary theory can provide useful models through which we can both explore parallels between music and literature *and* reflect on our own inherited "common sense" notions of pre-existing scholarship, theoretical models, and aesthetics. On the matter of parallelisms, an acousmatic composition invites comparison to a work of literature on a superficial level because it exists in a static form that can be duplicated, repeated, and referred to explicitly without the detriment of changes that accompany live performance interpretation. On a deeper level, such a piece has the potential ability to provoke discussion on topics such as musical meaning, reference, and narrative in a manner much more similar to literature than to instrumental music, due to the possibility of reference-laden sonic material. Existing theories of musical semiotics, hermeneutics, and the like can thus take on further nuances when applied to this repertoire.

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[3] Lawrence Kramer, "Music Criticism and the Postmodernist Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson," in *Critical Musicology and the Responsibility of Response: Selected Essays* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 48.
[4] Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14-15.

For example, one difference between the study of semiotic reference in acousmatic music and instrumental music is the possibility for an acousmatic piece to include sonic material that is much more explicitly referential to extra-musical elements than is easily possible in an instrumental piece. Whereas Messiaen attempted to represent birdsong in compositions such as *Rèveil des Oiseaux* or Villa-Lobos evoked the sound of locomotives in *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 2*, an acousmatic composer has the ability to compose with recorded representations of *actual* birds and locomotives. To be fair, many listeners of Messiaen and Villa-Lobos are able to accurately draw the intended connection between the musical signifiers and the real-world objects meant to be signified. However, the level of musical narrative possible with the limited abilities of acoustic instruments to evoke real-world objects or situations simply cannot compare to the greater possibilities present when using recorded sound. While semiotic analyses of electroacoustic pieces in the manner of "high structuralism" may be fruitful (and have been explored elsewhere), the present project is primarily concerned with theories of interpretation.

Interpretation (Hermeneutics)

Hermeneutics refers to a body of work concerned with interpreting texts – such scholarship frequently questioning the original author's intentions for the written word. One major issue that divides the hermeneutic literature is the question of whether texts should be considered "open" or "closed" – whether the reader is to create their own text through (possibly unlimited) interpretation or whether the author or the text itself hold the keys to the "correct" interpretation. Literary theorists associated with the "New Criticism" have discussed the idea of the author's pre-textual intention, suggesting that this cannot furnish the touchstone of interpretation, and may even be irrelevant or misleading as a guide to a text's meaning or meanings.[5] In other words, the intentions of the author or composer need not necessarily enter into a discussion of the work as an aesthetic object if we choose instead to focus on the intentions of the work itself. Umberto Eco has published several books and essays concerned with the interpretation of texts, and although his earlier work hinted at an affinity toward the idea of the "open work"[6], he has more recently written at length against the notion of unlimited semiosis, thereby placing certain boundaries upon the act of interpretation. In the introduction to *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco writes:

> "Even the most radical deconstructionists accept the idea that there are interpretations which are blatantly unacceptable. This means that the interpreted text imposes some constraints upon its interpreters. The limits of interpretation coincide with the rights of the text (which does not mean with the rights of its author)… If there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected."[7]

The distinction that Eco makes here between the interpretative limits imposed by the text itself versus limits imposed by the author bears mention with relation to my goals within this project to alternately consider and ignore the composer's pre-compositional intentions for the work or their guidance as offered through program notes. In his well-known essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes made the case for the removal of the Author as a figure whose intentions *must* be respected during the act of interpretation, noting that to "give a text an Author

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[5] Stefan Collini, "Introduction: Interpretation terminable and interminable," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6-10.
[6] See Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," in *The Role of the Reader*, 47-66.
[7] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 6-7.

is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing"; noting at the end that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."[8] While as an imaginative interpreter/reader/listener I relish the opportunity to construct my own interpretations divorced from any respect for the original Author, I also side with Eco in his idea that certain interpretations may in fact be blatantly unacceptable.

As an exploration of the potential "authority" of the composer, I turn briefly to my own composition *selectric.metal*. The goal in pursuing this topic is not to simply describe my own compositional procedures or my intentions for the work and then proceed to outline how others may discover this information through listening or analysis, but rather to illuminate through a very personal experience how such discussions may be extremely misleading and/or irrelevant to the listener's appreciation of the work. The compositional "method" that I reflexively witnessed myself undertaking during the composition of this piece was rather exploratory, with the resulting composition being simply the final iteration of a process undertaken with completely different goals in mind. Thus, I cannot afford my pre-compositional intentions any more weight towards establishing a *correct* interpretation of a composition than I can the moment-to-moment or reflective interpretations of the listener. Additionally, my own post-compositional listening and marketing of this piece is colored not only by the compositional process and my original intentions, but also the need to construct program notes and informal comments offered to potential listeners: the goal of which is typically to project a particular interpretation of the piece rather than letting the material speak for itself. My goal in pursuing both my own pre- and post-compositional interpretations of this piece alongside speculative "non-composer" listenings will be to further illustrate the validity of personal interpretive analyses in light of the composer's demonstrated lack of concrete authority.

selectric.metal (2011)

selectric.metal is a stereo fixed-media electroacoustic piece, composed in 2011. The work began as an exercise in using digital signal processing to gradually extend the timbre of a looping sample. Two main samples were used in the original version of the piece: an old-fashioned typewriter and an industrial sewing machine. To this I added a few short samples of a bouncing ping-pong ball and a camera. The basic early form of the piece featured the typewriter sample in the opening section, gradually becoming timbrally extended away from its original form. After an abrupt shift, the same process was repeated with the sewing machine sample. The signal processing for the sewing machine section included some amount of feedback, and the original end of the piece consisted of an extended drone resulting from this feedback process. A first version of the piece was performed on a public concert under the title *Untitled 2011*.

Though I felt *Untitled 2011* was ready for public consumption at the time, it became clear that the rudimentary form of the piece was too basic, and the material could not sustain interest. In beginning a revision of the piece, I began by taking a stereo mixdown of the original version, reversing the sound file, and placing it alongside the "forward" version of the same piece – in effect creating a palindrome. Mixing between these two versions of the piece provided some timbral variety, particularly in earlier sections of the piece where the drone originally found only at the end was now featured. I applied several pitch-shifting processes to the drone sound in order to create harmonies and a variety of glissandi, but the piece was still lacking some element of interest. In the spirit of "remixing" the piece, I located a set of drum loops and placed them end-to-end throughout the entire duration of the piece. Listening repeatedly to various sections

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[8] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148.

of the piece, I decided to mix in the drums whenever I felt that the rest of the material was becoming tedious. These "drum breaks" are usually accompanied by some sort of filter sweep.

Having very little idea what to make of this piece, I renamed it to reference a line of IBM typewriters and created the following cryptic set of program notes:

Type. Bounce. Hit. Manufacture.
Drone. Mix. Bake. Serve.

To a potential listener, this implies *agency*. These are action words, possibly representing actions undertaken by the composer during the creation of the piece. A composition with these program notes might include the sounds created when one types, bounces, hits, manufactures, drones, mixes, bakes, and serves. This is only partially true, as I intended to use these program notes to represent the larger process of composing the piece: mix, bake, and serve being the final three steps in my recipe for this piece.

In listening to *selectric.metal* as a work of sound art, the journey taken from one sonic world to another is smartly executed, the sounds are attractive, and the pacing is engaging. The referentiality of the sounds is somewhat baffling, though. One must question the relationship between typewriter, sewing machine, and drumset, within the context of the electronically-generated chaos that now surrounds them. Are these samples meant to be solely heard as Schaefferian "sound objects": packages of spectrum and time to be understood solely as such? Or does the electroacoustic medium allow for the creation of a middleground between these three sound worlds, creating a narrative by which one sound transforms into another? More puzzling is the connection between the program notes and the piece of music. In describing a list of actions that are supposedly related to the piece, it seems as if I am implying to the listener that either these actions or the objects involved in said actions are somehow important to the perceptual experience of the piece.

In a masterclass with a certain composer, he made it known that his impression of the non-drone sounds was "an exploration of rhythm." The typewriter, the sewing machine, and the drumset each have their own looping rhythmic pattern, and he was able to hear connections between these patterns; noting that he thought I had somehow engineered these rhythms to be complementary in some fashion. In reality, the three main rhythmic loops within the piece arrived in my compositional toolbox fully-formed – apart from some minor editing and the obvious signal processing I made no effort to combine any of these separate rhythms. However, the typewriter section and the sewing machine section still maintain their overall processing trajectories from the early version of the piece. The processes by which these two sounds become timbrally and rhythmically extended are virtually identical, and the resulting sonic spaces are quite similar. When I hear these sections, I can clearly discern a difference between the two – it may be easier for others to form this connection.

Upon submitting *selectric.metal* to a competition, I received the following from the juror:

"I'll never type again!—I've never heard a typewriter sound so juicy. I appreciated the concise sound world, and also the ability to stop and start coherently (especially ca. 1:30)—it wasn't only a beautifully morphing, massed texture the whole time. The pitched material is quite beautiful, and parses the whole piece for me formally. The almost drumsetty material is cleverly brought in and out. I wondered a bit about the sudden retreat to quietness at 2:15—though I liked the formal idea of it, I wondered what immediate events motivated it. Around 5:06, very gorgeous."

These comments suggest that this listener appreciated the piece on the level of "absolute music"; apart from naming the typewriter sound, he did not make any effort to interpret the referential sounds in the piece, nor to account for any sort of extra-musical narrative. It is curious to note that the sounds he labeled as "almost drumsetty material" were indeed samples of an acoustic drumset subjected to subtle and drastic digital processing. Within the context of the absolute music framework where this listener placed the piece, the connection between this material and an actual drumset was likely irrelevant.

The comments offered above, combined with my own listening experience and other informal comments offered after performances, all point to a non-referential listening of the piece. While the sounds are indeed referential to real-world objects and situations, it is difficult to hear the assembly of the sounds as a narrative of any sort. It seems as if it is most appropriate to discuss *selectric.metal* in terms of Pierre Schaeffer's reduced listening – "actual" typewriters, sewing machines, ping pong balls, and cameras play no meaningful role in this piece. If this is indeed the case, why include such misleading program notes? Perhaps a more accurate set of program notes might be "*selectric.metal* is absolute music. I hope you enjoy it."

This exploration of my own compositional process has served to demonstrate the importance of respecting the "intentions of the work" while conducting a critical analysis, recognizing that the composer's goals and program notes are oftentimes misleading. While this point has been discussed at length within literary circles, many analyses of electroacoustic music would do well to set aside any notion of "uncovering" what a composer intended to do within a work and instead focus on the connection between the music and the listener. I now turn to a more in-depth analysis of James Mobberley's *Vox Metallica*.

James Mobberley's *Vox Metallica* (2006)

James Mobberley's program notes read as follows:
> "VOX METALLICA, for fixed 2-channel digital media, uses a collection of recordings of non-singing sounds from several different sources, plus recordings of guitars, bass guitar, drum set, and organ as sound sources. Context being a critical part of our memory and pattern-recognition processes, Vox Metallica plays with familiar and non-familiar juxtapositions of elements from "classical" electro-acoustic and popular music. After all, it's both a short walk, and a very long walk, from uptown to downtown…" [9] [10]

Mobberley's notes provide an appropriate backdrop upon which we can undertake an initial, relatively straightforward discussion of the piece. After doing so, I will proceed with a slightly more oppositional reading of the piece, demonstrating that things may not be as clear-cut as Mobberley has implied. The ensuing two-part discussion will mirror my own experience as a listener of *Vox Metallica*. I was first introduced to this piece at the 2006 Society for Electro-Acoustic Music in the United States (SEAMUS) National Conference. Prior to hearing the piece in concert, Jon Appleton (my professor at Dartmouth at the time) introduced me to James Mobberley. During our brief discussion, Mobberley characterized *Vox Metallica* as something like "a little rock music," noting that he enjoyed having some fun with pieces that he submitted to conferences like SEAMUS. At the time of my inaugural experience of the piece in concert

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[9] Ellipses found in original. James Mobberley, "Liner Notes, VOX METALLICA," *Music from SEAMUS* vol 16 (Compact Disc, 2007).
[10] As Mobberley has been inconsistent with the capitalization of the composition's title in his own program notes, I will henceforth use the less abrasive form of *Vox Metallica*.

later that day, I recall hearing the piece precisely as I felt Mobberley intended it to be heard, and enjoying it immensely. However, in listening to the piece several more times privately, in concert, and in the classroom as an example for my students over the intervening years, my interpretation of certain elements of the piece have undergone a change.

Background

In his program notes, Mobberley has primed the listener's ears with the expectation that the sounds utilized in this piece belong to (or are reminiscent of) two different musical styles: "classical" electroacoustic music and popular music – an expectation that is confirmed easily within the first ninety seconds of the piece. He has also suggested that *context* may play a role in the understanding of individual sound objects, perhaps with the idea that a stereotypical sound belonging to one recognizable musical style may take on other meanings when removed from the original context. "Familiar and non-familiar juxtapositions" of these elements are anticipated, though it must be acknowledged that most listeners will be more likely to fall into the "non-familiar" category. Finally, Mobberley makes a cryptic statement regarding "uptown" and "downtown": one that requires a small amount of explanation prior to further discussion.

To those individuals knowledgeable of late twentieth-century American music, the terms *uptown* and *downtown* most often refer to the aesthetic differences found in different regions of the New York City "new music" scene starting in the 1960's. In characterizing the uptown/downtown dichotomy as viewed in 1979, Kyle Gann wrote:

> "The Uptowners, such as Milton Babbitt and Jacob Druckman, wrote complicated music in European genres, heavily dominated at that time by Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone thinking and its derivatives. Downtown music was simpler and less pretentious, drawing on the nature- and accident-accepting philosophy of John Cage. Conceptualism and minimalism were, then, the two primary Downtown movements; artrock and free improvisation would soon join them."[11]

In using the terms *uptown* and *downtown* to characterize the interplay between the "classical" electroacoustic style and popular style found in Vox Metallica, Mobberley is seemingly aligning the "popular" style (to be discovered upon listening as *rock*-influenced) with the downtown music scene: most likely artrock and free improvisation. I have difficulty with this particular parallel, as will be demonstrated later. Regardless, Mobberley's observation on the geographical and aesthetic distance between these two musical worlds is intriguing, suggesting that his desire is to close the conceptual gap through the juxtaposition of style.

Mobberley's program notes and my own listening experience both lead toward an *intertextual* exploration of the piece. Intertextuality can be understood as the manner in which a reader (or listener) brings their knowledge of other texts into their interpretation of any single text, acknowledging that any text is defined through its relation to other texts. More than simply noting explicit references across texts, an intertextual criticism recognizes that the totality of one's understanding of any one text is necessarily filtered through one's understanding of all other texts, in effect "tracing echoes and reflections of other texts." [12] Richard Rorty hinted at the pervasiveness of intertextual interpretation when he wrote that "[r]eading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens. What happens may be something too weird and idiosyncratic to

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[11] Kyle Gann, *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), xii.

[12] David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, *Musicology: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 95.

bother with… [o]r it may be exciting and convincing". Rorty proceeds to warn interpretive readers that these intertextual relations "may be *so* exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is *really* about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced."[13]

I suggest that the intertextual references to other musical styles and aesthetic movements in *Vox Metallica*, both in the music and in the program notes, prove to be problematic when subjected to different possibilities of intertextual criticism. Thus, the two approaches will proceed as follows: I will first perform a critical (and somewhat dry) analysis of the piece as I believe Mobberley *most likely* intended and how I originally heard the piece, and will then continue with a more oppositional and perhaps fanciful analysis of the piece taking into account the intertextual connections that *I* bring to the listening experience. Throughout this discussion both the reader and I should keep in mind Rorty's warning regarding the danger of assuming that any one intertextual connection is in any way illuminating of what a work is *really* about, supposing that such a definitive discovery of a work's "true" nature can ever be possible. I cannot presume that my intertextual interpretation of Mobberley's piece serves to unravel Mobberley's intentions or even the perceptual experience of any other listener. In the end this may simply serve as my own "interpretive journal" – a public record of my own experience with the piece without the positivistic goals of analysis.

Initial Discussion

As is anticipated from Mobberley's program notes, *Vox Metallica* not only includes sounds that are most often identified with "electroacoustic" or "rock" music, but also finds its form by contrasting and combining these sounds and their accompanying characteristic stylistic gestures.[14] The "non-singing sounds" referenced in the program notes are in fact non-singing *vocal* sounds, including pops, clicks, groans, screams, and unintelligible speech-like vocalizations. These vocal sounds comprise the entirety of the EA sounds found in the piece. The guitars, bass guitar, drum set, and organ sound sources make up the set of Rock sounds, and they seem to have all been performed (prior to digital manipulation) in a "standard" rock fashion without the use of extended techniques.

The compositional treatment of sounds from these two sets is initially consistent with either EA or Rock style. At the beginning of the piece, EA sounds are introduced with a rhythmically sparse dispersal and an absence of clear pulse. Digital sound manipulation is evident through the presence of artificial reverberation, pitch shifting, and time stretching. Between 0:49 and 0:56, a very characteristic EA gesture is presented as a series of short sounds begins with a burst, slows down, and then reverses trajectory to speed back up – a phrase rhythmically reminiscent of early tape manipulation, albeit without pitch change. Rock sounds are also treated in a stylistically consistent fashion at the outset, as the first Rock "moment" occurs at 1:13 with a pick-scraped descending distorted electric guitar gesture. Additional Rock

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[13] This quote forms part of Rorty's larger discussion regarding the possible difference between *using* a text and *interpreting* a text, pointing out that he prefers to view both actions as different people using texts for different purposes. Indeed, my own public interpretive or analytical acts may be viewed simply as the *use* of a composition for my own purposes. This interesting possibility should always be considered, but will not be dealt with explicitly in this project. Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 105-106.

[14] To aid in the following discussion, subsequent references to characteristic sounds or sound treatments from "electroacoustic music" will be referred to as EA, while the "rock music" materials and treatments will be referred to as Rock.

material includes distorted electric guitar power chords, pyrotechnic guitar solo material, and the section beginning at 4:42 with a very strong constant pulse and drum sounds.

Throughout the course of the piece, the EA and Rock sounds are not limited to compositional treatments belonging to the stylistic world from which they originated. EA sounds are oftentimes treated in a Rock fashion, and vice versa. The following table details the usage of both varieties of sound source and musical style.

EA and rock sound/style analysis of Vox Metallica

Time	EA sounds	Rock sounds	EA style	Rock style
0:00	X		X	
1:13	X	X		X
1:18	X		X	
1:39	X	X		X
2:02	X	x	X	
2:11		X		X
2:24	X	X	X	
4:42	x	X		X
5:29	x	X	X	x
6:14	X	x	X	
6:56	X	X	X	X
7:47	X	X		X

A single X in a sound or style column indicates the presence of a single style or sound. The presence of an X in both sound or style columns indicates a mixture, with the larger X indicating the predominant feature.

The piece has no clear repetitions of material and thus eludes motivic analysis or a formal analysis that utilizes markers such as A, B, C, A', etc. Sonic material, musical style, and their various permutations are the building blocks of this piece. In reviewing the table, a very basic form is apparent within the two style columns: until the end of the piece, Mobberley simply alternates between sections with an overall EA style or an overall Rock style. While the sounds present within these sections do not follow any sort of pattern, the alternation of style proves to be a very effective way to convey a sense of progress throughout the piece. Overall, the trajectory of the piece sees both EA and Rock sounds presented initially in "expected" ways, with material progressively getting treated more radically, leading up to the final minutes of the piece where all sounds and styles combine together – Rock style winning out at the end.

After this brief and dry discussion of the elements within the piece viewed as "most likely" intended by Mobberley, I will now proceed with a number of additional observations based upon my intertextual experience with the piece.

Further Interpretation

Although I initially experienced *Vox Metallica* as an honest and well-executed combination of electroacoustic and rock music, I have since come to question these assumptions. What makes the piece engaging is certainly this combination of sounds and styles intersecting in unique ways, but it seems now that neither the EA nor the Rock material could sufficiently stand on its own. The opening EA section seems extremely clichéd in its austere presentation of tiny pitch-shifted and reverberated sounds – it almost feels like *Dripsody, Part II*. Likewise, the "Rock" material is poorly recorded and cheap-sounding. This is not *real* electroacoustic or *real* rock music – this is a combination of tired gestures executed poorly. *Vox Metallica* is a parody or a caricature. It is a series of simulacra.

If the meaning of Mobberley's title was not apparent prior to an initial listening, it becomes quite clear in the opening two minutes of the piece. *Vox* symbolizes the EA vocal sounds, while *Metallica* symbolizes the Rock sounds. Individuals who have not been living under rocks since the mid 1980's will realize that the latter is meant to reference the American heavy metal band Metallica.[15] Any listener experienced with Metallica's catalogue will be able to note that the Rock sounds and materials present in Mobberley's piece are not exactly evocative of the band's sound or style. The distorted electric guitar material in *Vox Metallica* sounds as if it was recorded through a cheap amp simulator, the drum sounds seem to be straight out of a $150 drum machine, and one would be hard-pressed to locate an organ within the instrumentation of any Metallica album. Rather, the Rock sounds and materials seem to be more often reminiscent of 1970s hard rock bands. The section beginning at 4:42 is perhaps most representative of the 1970s influence, from the slide-guitar riff at the opening to the Hammond B3-esque stabs and glissandi culminating around 5:30. A nod to Pink Floyd takes place in the area between 7:00 and 7:45, as the repeating synthesizer arpeggio recalls the extremely similar gesture found in *On The Run* from the band's 1973 album *Dark Side of the Moon*. However, even these 1970s-style gestures are lacking the timbral specificity of their forebears. Whereas the EMS synthesizer used to sequence Pink Floyd's arpeggio is timbrally rich and the performance includes changes in filter settings, Mobberley's rendition is flat and static. The Hammond B3-like material sounds as if it was performed by calling up a preset organ patch on a digital keyboard and recorded through a DI box – no tube amplifier distortion or whirling Leslie speaker in evidence. Keith Emerson would be embarrassed.

If these "stereotypical" Rock elements in *Vox Metallica* serve to stand as signs for *real* rock music but fail to achieve realness, they are thus *simulacra* – representations or copies of the original that fail to achieve "sameness" with the original. They are falsely-constructed realities designed to resemble their source so closely that we buy into the illusion of their *realness*. "Hyperreality" is the term used by theorists and philosophers to describe the inability to discern the copy from the original, and although the accompanying rhetoric delves unnecessarily into the very nature of living in the world (consumerist society in particular), one specific example proves relevant to Mobberley's piece: Disneyland.

Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco have both written about the various representations of the *real* world present in the constructed Worlds of Disneyland; Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Main Street USA, Adventureland, etc. Writing of the Main Street USA section of the park, Eco notes how this street is "presented as at once absolutely realistic and absolutely fantastic… belonging to a fantastic past that we can grasp with our imagination."[16] In discussing how the robotic animals on the Jungle Cruise ride perform for spectators on cue, Eco compares this to the experience of taking a *real* river cruise,

> "where the captain of the paddle-wheel steamer says it is possible to see alligators on the banks of the river, and then you don't see any, you risk feeling homesick for Disneyland, where the wild animals don't have to be coaxed. Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can."[17]

Baudrillard's take on Disneyland is even more nihilist, arguing that the simulacra of Disneyland serve to obscure the fact that even the *real* world represented in the simulacrum is

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[15] Considering Metallica's well-known copyright infringement lawsuit against the file-sharing service Napster in 2000, it would be interesting to discover whether the title of this composition ever crossed the desk of their lawyers.
[16] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 43.
[17] Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 44.

itself fake.[18] Leaving the more extreme viewpoints behind, the constructed realities of Disneyland form an interesting parallel to the simulated Rock material in *Vox Metallica*. As Eco wrote, the Main Street represented in Disneyland is clearly meant to evoke "Everytown USA", albeit one from a "fantastic past." No American Main Street ever looked exactly the way we see when we enter the gates of Disneyland; polished windows, clean gutters, smiling faces, barbershop quartets, Mom, and apple pie. This is an ideal reality engineered to evoke as many of our own recollections of similar realities as possible, in order that we may buy into the fantasy.

Recall Mobberley's reference to uptown and downtown music in the program notes; one might initially interpret (as I did) the uptown reference to signify "classic" electroacoustic music, and the downtown reference to signify rock music. However, this is not in keeping with the usage of the terms as demonstrated in the Kyle Gann quote earlier. "Downtown" does not signify any element of popular music, but rather the sorts of *New Music* happening in downtown NYC venues – artrock, free improvisation, conceptualism, minimalism, and more. Mobberley's juxtaposition of different musical styles is reminiscent of one well-known participant in the Downtown scene: John Zorn. Zorn's music "draws upon elements and techniques from a number of musical genres and traditions such as rock and popular music from all over the world, jazz…, classical music…, improvised music, and film music."[19] One would be hard-pressed to uncover a category that Zorn does *not* draw upon in his music.

One potential problem with such "collages" of musical style (indeed, treating style *as* material) is the danger of only representing certain elements of a style and its accompanying culture while discarding the rest. A major criticism of Third Stream compositions in the 1950s and 60s was that in combining *classical* with *jazz*, one is left with some mutant child halfway in between that does not truly respect the heritage of either parent. The elements that certain Downtown composers draw from either EA or Rock music may in fact be judged the same as the elements chosen to represent the frontier, the jungle, the future, or Main Street at Disneyland. The waitress dressed up in "authentic" frontier garb who brings over a patron's burger in a simulated Western saloon at Disneyland is no more of a true representation of the *real* American frontier than the presence of distorted power chords on an electric guitar is a true representation of *real* rock music. Both are simulacra.

Following this interpretation of *Vox Metallica* to its conclusion, Mobberley has constructed a masterful parody of "downtown music", and indeed any polystylistic New Music. While on the surface the composition may appear to simply combine EA/Rock sounds with EA/Rock treatments in multiple permutations, upon closer reflection it is neither EA nor Rock – it was never meant to be. When EA and Rock elements collide within the piece, the effect is that of costumed performers from different simulated worlds crossing paths – the aforementioned frontier waitress sitting down on her lunch break with an astronaut. All of the above are simply false representations meant to appropriate style without substance.

The two different views of *Vox Metallica* detailed here illustrate the interpretive possibilities available when considering *only* the materials internal to a piece and its program notes versus considering potential interpretations informed by intertextual connections. Perhaps this reading of the piece has "uncovered" some hidden agenda on the composer's part, or perhaps I am guilty of (as Richard Rorty might claim) using this text for my own purposes. Or perhaps Mobberley simply wanted to write "a little rock music."

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[18] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12-13.

[19] John Brackett, "Zorn, John," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2225901 (accessed February 5, 2013).

Concluding Thoughts and Further Directions

Discourses and critical analyses such as this can be quite fruitful in the effort to further illustrate how electroacoustic compositions may be understood by the non-specialist audience. An emphasis on technology and compositional procedure does not illuminate the experience of *listening* to a work, and such an emphasis may even serve to turn potential listeners away. I suggest that the most constructive way to advance the agenda proposed in this project is twofold: to not only begin to include critical analyses of specific compositions within typical venues for electroacoustic scholarship, but to also begin to turn the attention of those who are not themselves practitioners toward the extended possibilities for musical discourse present in this style of music. Within the electroacoustic community, Landy's "bias toward formalism" has certainly been evident as journal articles, books, and conference presentations move more toward discussions of characterizing broad trends, technologies and compositional procedure at the expense of any discussion of criticism or aesthetic speculation. The most significant books published within the last decade on electroacoustic music topics have been overviews, and many volumes published prior to that are the victim of small publication numbers and are typically out of print. While certain musicologists have done well to include discussions of electroacoustic music in their overviews of late twentieth-century music, the overwhelming majority of contemporary musicological and theoretical scholarship concerns itself with acoustic music, even then shying away from late twentieth century repertoire. Some crossover between the scholarship of electroacoustic and non-electroacoustic music, when appropriate, could help to illuminate the ways in which electroacoustic music may help us to understand certain theoretical and perceptual concepts in music, and may assist potential listeners in forming connections between the two formats.

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