

The Age of Musical Reproduction and John Oswald's Plunderphonics

Recording technology and the notion of sampling provides a new tool for quotation (Holm-Hudson, "Quotation and Context" 24) in music and it has become a unique practice on its own (Cutler 146). Partly due to the relatively recent mass availability of the technical means to record and sample sound (Cutler 149), but mostly due to the established notions of music and the capitalist social and economic organizations around them (Negativland 92), it has been a problematic issue, both legally and conceptually (Cutler 140). In this paper I will try to put the practice of sampling in the context of artistic, and more specifically musical quotation, and examine its implications around the concepts of reproducibility, ownership, originality and high and low art, and discuss the Plunderphonics works of John Oswald in relation to these points.

Quotation, Recording, Sampling

Quotation, defined by Kevin Holm-Hudson as "reproducing a melodic, stylistic or timbral excerpt of a pre-existing musical work in the new context of another musical work", has always been a fundamental part of musical creativity. It may be stylistic appropriation as found, among many other examples, in a Mozart piano sonata of a gavotte dance rhythm or melodic quotation as found, again among other examples, in Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* in which he uses the "Dies Irae" chant or in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* which has a quotation of "La Marseillaise" ("Quotation and Context" 17). Both stylistic appropriation and melodic quotation can be found in the works of Charles Ives ("Quotation and Context" 24) who was able to use other tunes or hymns in his works since at the time much of music, including those that were contemporary then, existed in public domain (Oswald, "Bettered by the Borrower" 136).

These are but a few examples that show that quotation has been a valid method in musical composition. According to Holm-Hudson, “there is [necessarily] an element of borrowing ... in every successful instance of musical communication”, since “every piece of unfamiliar music is compared to the previously heard and accepted musical language stored in our memory” (“Quotation and Context” 17). He also explains Christopher Ballantine’s analysis of the potential levels of meaning that quotation may convey, which is helpful in understanding the validity of it in music. At the first level, quotation may only be involved in abstract musical relationships in a work. The second level involves extramusical meaning conveyed, as, for example, the approaching of storm by Beethoven’s use of quiet timpani. At the third level of meaning, which may constitute a basis of understanding for the discussions that will follow, specifically around sampling, is the realization that “the meaning is constructed not only by ... individual melodic or stylistic references [in the piece], but by a new, cumulative meaning constructed from the interaction of these references” (“Quotation and Context” 18). As such, Ballantine states, “the composition uses the associations connoted by ... [the] quotations, but implies an attitude towards them” (qtd. in Holm-Hudson, “Quotation and Context” 18).

The ability to record sound has been around since 1870s (Cutler 143) and as early as 1923, the potential of this, what has been primarily thought to be, reproductive capability as a medium of production has been anticipated (Moholy-Nagy 332). When sound is recorded, it becomes an object; everything that can be heard can be a material for musical organization. However, such an incredible capability, a vast source, was not immediately in high demand for exploitation and it is still so today. One fundamental reason that art music has been slow to tap into this resource is the notion of notation buried into the traditional musical paradigms. Notation is “a system of mediation which determines both what musical material is available and what possible forms of organization can be applied to it”. It is an inherently visual system that is unable to encompass the complexity that is offered by the recording technology (Cutler 140).

When sound is recorded and turned into an object, the best, and the only natural way to see it is as raw material. The source is not the thing that defines a sound recording (Cutler 142). As Oswald says, "Music is information and, as such, is a renewable source. Intellectual real estate is infinitely divisible" ("Creatigality" 87). Therefore, "All recorded sound, as recorded sound, is information of the same quality. A recording of a recording is just a recording. No more, no less" (Cutler 142). Attributing authority to the recorded object does not make sense since it is subject to mass mechanical reproduction and, as in Ballantine's third level, it is often "put into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself" (Benjamin 521). Moreover, here it is unclear what original is.

In principle, a sound recording, like a photograph, is merely surface. It has no depths, reveals no process and is no palimpsest. It's just there; always first, always a copy. It has no aura, nor any connection to a present source (Cutler 144).

If we consider the following, it is perhaps clearer to understand why this is a more natural approach than those of old models centered on notation. (Cutler 152). The environment that we perceive and are surrounded by today is no longer a completely natural one. The ever-growing media environment is just as real and just as affecting as the natural one. Media shapes most of our opinions today, as opposed to our own experiences (Negativland 92). The music that we hear today is largely made up of recorded music. The amount we listen as live music is very small in comparison and "recording is now the primary medium through which musical ideas and inspiration spread" (Cutler 152) and "sampling is the most extreme contemporary example of a music which absorbs into itself the music which surrounds it" (Toop, "Ocean of Sound" 261).

When recorded sound is put into use in the context of another musical piece, it is called sampling, dubbing or plundering. Essentially, it is a capability that allows more precise quotation in music, since, different from stylistic appropriation and

melodic quotation, it captures “the timbre of a sonic event, as well as its pitch and duration” (Holm-Hudson, “Quotation and Context” 24). However, it is often not that simple. Original context of the sample, especially in popular music, will often remain to be heard (Holm-Hudson, “Quotation and Context” 18). This original context, in other words the referential aspect of the sample, can either be tried to be stripped or used purposefully for itself (Cutler 146). There exist studies that categorize the usage of samples (Holm-Hudson, “Quotation and Context” 24) but Cutler’s observation applies for all cases:

Plundered sound carries, above all, the unique ability not just to *refer* but to *be*; it offers not just a means but a new meaning. It is this dual character that confuses the debates about originality which so vex it (146).

Such uses of already existing material, regardless of their medium of existence, transforming them to obtain new meanings in the artwork is not an alien thing to art at all.

In the early years of this century, Cubists began to attach found materials such as product packaging and photographs to their paintings. ... It flowered through collage, Dada’s found objects and concept of “detournement,” and peaked in the visual arts at mid-century with Pop Art’s appropriation of mass culture icons and mass media imagery (Negativland 91).

Sound recordings serve just as well as found materials to be articulated, fragmented, reoriginated; just as the captured visual images in Warhol, Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein, or directly imported, found objects in Duchamp, Harris, Rotella, De la Villegle and others – “all of which *depend upon* their actuality and provenance (as ready-mades) (Cutler 146).

John Oswald, Plunderphonics, and Implications

John Oswald, born in 1953, may have many titles including composer, saxophonist, and dancer but what would be most suitable in terms of encompassing the work he does is probably to describe him as a multi-media artist. He is a Canadian artist who lives in Toronto. His musical training includes studying with, among others, R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax at Simon Fraser University and David Rosenboom at York University. He has played saxophone, danced and was involved with many other projects in many diverse, and mostly improvisational settings throughout Canada and USA. He is best known for his works and practice of “plunderphonics” It is a term Oswald coined to mean sampling and re-editing sound recordings to change them radically. In his plunderphonics pieces, Oswald recontextualizes familiar fragments of recordings, which are often chosen to be pieces of popular music. (Cox and Warner 131; ubuweb.com).

Oswald first started his experimentations with sampling, or musical cut-ups in the early 1970s (Cox and Warner 131). At the time the standard medium of recording and sampling was tape, but the advent of digital sampling, which would bring “plundering to the centre of mass consumption ... [and] made sound piracy so easy that it didn’t make sense *not* to do it” was only about a decade away (Cutler 149). Even though, despite the technical availability since the beginning of the century, the practice of plundering got off to a slow start, the key works that opened up the field in terms of ideas – such as Pierre Schaeffer’s *Etude aux tourniquets* (1948), where he experimented with radio sound archive discs, and John Cage’s *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, in which readymade materials from radios were employed, or *Imaginary Landscape No. 5*, in which gramophone records were used as sound material – had been given. More importantly techniques for plunderphonic practice had also arrived with James Tenney’s *Collage No.1 (“Blue Suede”)* (1961), which was

a manipulation of the hit record “Blue Suede Shoes” from Elvis Presley, which is a cover of the original song itself (Cutler 145).

These are among the examples from the domain of high art, through which many of the creative innovations in the new medium were made. However, the “adoption and subsequent extension [of these innovations] has come typically through other, less ideologically intimidated (or less paradigmatically confused?) musical genres”. The main reason for this is the incompatibility of the old art music paradigms with the recording technology (Cutler, 140). The other domain that “proved more able to explore ... [the] inherent possibilities” of plundering was the low art counterpart, namely popular music. Since once recorded, there is no distinction, either as material or in terms of availability, between “art” music and “pop” music, there was strong tendency among the “teenage generation of the late 1960s” for “experiments with sound, stylistic bricolage, importations, the use of electronics, “inappropriate” instruments and – crucially – recording techniques” (Cutler 147).

What came out of this environment was on the one hand a flourishing of popular music that made use of straightforward plunder, such as the works of The Residents (Cutler 148), and on the other hand the practice of scratching and subsequently the DJ culture. Realtime manipulation of recordings on 12” discs on specialized turntables is called scratching. Although it was developed mainly in US discos as the DJs “began to programme the records they played” (Cutler 150), the birth of this practice was probably in Jamaica around late 60s, in the form of Dub, where, in the hands of the likes of Lee Perry, “the mixing board [became] a pictorial instrument” and crowds went wild as the sounds changed shape in oceans of effects, processing and manipulation (Toop, “Replicant” 356-7).

One of the most interesting implications of this context was the crossplay between, or inter-penetrations of high and low art. As already mentioned, the influence of art music from the likes of Schaeffer and Cage among others, prepared the experimental environment that fed the developments in popular music and the DJ culture.

Another shift happened when scratching became fashionable in mid-1970s in radical black disco music. Christian Marclay adopted this culture and using its techniques and more on plundered recordings, “rose to prominence as a member of the early 1980s New York scene[;] ... his cultural status ... slowly shifted, from low to high”. Marclay’s work

traces the radical inter-penetrations of low and high art in the leveling age of sound recording; the swing between high art experiment, low art creativity and high art reappropriation, as the two approach one another until, at their fringes, they become indistinguishable (Cutler 150-1).

Equally applicable to plunderphonics, “the distinction [becomes increasingly] meaningless and impossible to draw since the crossplay – or perhaps simultaneities – between works that would once be considered as high or low art are obvious (Cutler 147).

Due to its self-reflexive nature, that is that “it begins and ends only with recordings, with the *already played*”, plunderphonics challenges our current understanding of originality, individuality and property rights. It is therefore problematic for the traditional conceptions of art music, which are rooted in these values. Sound recording necessarily renders traditional musical notation, an inherently visual system, inadequate, and replaces it with an aural one based on biological memory (Cutler, 141). As such it confronts, in a way, the openness of music as a device of social control, exercised through the controlling of the visual paradigms of its creation (Eisler and Adorno 74). Indeed, notation has been individual’s proof of originality and source of claim for ownership – a direct reflection of the values that are put to question – and still lies at the roots of copyright establishment (Cutler 141).

Copyright, “a charter of control over the commercial and moral implications of reproduction” (Oswald, “Bettered by the Borrower 132) has been “a means for

record companies and music publishers, who [instead of the artists] usually own the copyrights to songs, to insure income. Copyrights are bought, sold and exploited via licensing fees and royalties” (Jones qtd. in Holm-Hudson, “John Oswald’s Rubiyat” 20). The laws of copyright are put in place, “not by anyone who makes art, but by the parasitic middle men of culture” (Negativland 92). Moreover, the copyright system, among its other defects, is inadequate of dealing with the necessities that recording technology brings. Now, not only the written music, but all recorded sonic events are fixed and permanent (Cutler 141) and also subject to publication and mass dissemination. In this situation the property metaphor used to illustrate artists’ rights inevitably fails (Oswald, “Bettered by the Borrower” 136) since it is based on an ownership concept based on old models rooted in notation (Cutler 143).

The question of whether one can own a sound is one element of a larger issue that has plagued the art world throughout the twentieth century; at what point does individual or collective creativity begin? ... At what point do the raw materials of artists’ works (be they sounds, colors or words) become the intrinsic elements of personal expression? When do they cease to be materials and become products? (Porcello qtd. in Holm-Hudson, “John Oswald’s Rubiyat” 20)

Timbre is one of the central elements that Oswald deals with. He also coined the term “plunderphone” to refer to the smallest recognizable sonic quote in a work (Holm-Hudson, “Quotation and Context” 21). According to him, “a fan can recognize a hit from a ten-millisecond burst” (Oswald, “Bettered by the Borrower” 133), demonstrated by the instantaneous responses of contestants in tune recognition contests (Holm-Hudson, “Quotation and Context” 21). Dealing with sounds at this duration range, “the precarious commodity in music today is no longer the tune” (Oswald, “Bettered by the Borrower” 133). This raises many issues that Oswald addresses when he asks: “Can the sounding materials that inspire composition be

sometimes considered compositions themselves? ... Is timbre less definably possible than a melody?" (Oswald qtd. in Holm-Hudson, "Quotation and Context" 21).

As Holm-Hudson describes, "Oswald's plunderphonics pieces are provocative because they invariably address not only the issue of fragment in its changed context, but also the nature of ownership itself – not merely of a melody or a recognizable fragment, but of even the most atomistic elements of sound: pitch and timbre." As he uses very short samples in his music, the listener is compelled to listen on the basis of timbre. A typical piece showing his approach to appropriation is "DAB" from his CD, *Plunderphonic*. In the piece Oswald uses plundered material from Michael Jackson's "Bad". Through manipulation, the rhythmic structure of the piece is deconstructed and Jackson's voice is extended, or magnified with a technique Oswald calls "snap-scan", which is "an aural analogue of frame-by-frame playing of a film or videotape" (Holm-Hudson, "Quotation and Context" 21).

The CD (first as an EP), *Plunderphonic*, even though released with limited quantity on Oswald's dime, strictly as not-for-sale, and distributed free of charge by himself to non-commercial radio stations and educational institutions (Holm-Hudson, "Quotation and Context" 21), forced the whole concept of copyright into question, which up to that point remained unquestioned (Cutler 142). Oswald was faced with disproportionate industry pressure, triggered by Michael Jackson's management and forced him to destroy all remaining copies of the CD.

Oswald's work has a significant place in modern music. Firstly, even though his was not the first of the practices that uses the same principle as he does, namely plundering, until he coined the term plunderphonics and thus identified and consolidated the musical practice, which had been without focus, the conditions for a new art form was incomplete. Plundering, or sampling practice lacked "a metalanguage, a theory through which it can adequately be described." Oswald's *Plunderphonic* achieves this by bringing "at last into sharp relief many of the critical

questions around which such a theory can be raised” (Cutler 141). Secondly, plunderphonics challenges the existing art music paradigms by undermining three of its central pillars: “*originality* (it deals only with copies), *individuality* (it speaks only with the voice of others), and *copyright* (the breaching of which is a condition of its very existence).

Quotation in music, and in other art forms as well, has always been a valid method of creation since the changed context of the quoted material is what determines its new meaning. Since as, John Oswald says, the musical language has no equivalent of quotation marks (Oswald, “Bettered by the Borrower” 132) and it cannot represent the complexities offered by the recording technology, the traditional notions of art music, which depends on notation, is not adequate to encompass the new musical practices brought by this technology and usage of recorded sound as raw material – a crucial necessity in today’s media dominated environment. Oswald, raised in a context where the practice of sampling was flourishing in both high and low art circles and feeding each other, put the loose practice of sampling, or plundering into focus by coining the term *plunderphonics* and paved the way for theories for the field as a new art form. His works, a typical but, in terms of its consequences, an important one being “DAB”, brought into question the concepts of originality, individuality and copyright and thus challenged the very core notions of the prevailing musical paradigms.

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