Representation, Radicalism, and Music "After Sound":

A Composer's Perspective on the Music of the Future in Music Therapy

Aaron Moorehouse[1] *

1 Bath Spa University, United Kingdom

*Aaron.MoorehouseEverett@gmail.com

Abstract

This commentary presents an experimental-composer's perspective on contemporary music therapy practice. I begin by offering my impressions of the field, gathered through interviews with practising music therapists, and an examination of the relevant literature. Then, the commentary first draws upon G. Douglas Barrett's radical post-sonic theorisation of music to question the future of existing music in therapy, before instrumentalising avant-garde aesthetics to imagine what music may become in music therapy. This exploration will pay particular attention to the impacts of the dematerialisation of the art object in contemporary art, and the potential benefits a similar decentering of sound in contemporary music practices may provoke—specifically, the creation of theoretical frameworks that further suppress the authority of canonical forms, and increased contributions from previously-marginalised groups. Next, the commentary presents an analysis of two recent musical compositions that determinedly decenter sound, before examining the appropriateness of this aesthetic to therapeutic contexts. Finally, the commentary signposts a number of historical antecedents that illustrate music therapy's potential for rigorous (and radical) self-examination, and examines how these efforts may be expanded.

Keywords: *Radicalism, Avantgardism, Dematerialisation and Decentering, Composition, Diversity, Representation*

Introduction

As an experimental-composer primarily working with participatory performance and social engagement, I find myself regularly exploring novel perspectives from which to ground my practice. Subsequently, it was not long before I stumbled into music therapy scholarship. Here, I found a field of study that I consider to be even more pluralistic than my conception of music itself; writing that rekindled my dwindling faith in the potential for the arts to act as a vehicle for meaningful positive change. As such, my

doctoral study has partly become an investigation into the lack of contemporary composers paying attention to this body of research—an exploration into why even "socially engaged" composers are reluctant to situate their practices alongside the social, psychological, or physiological domains that become implicated in music therapy literature.[1] However, there is also a complementary angle to my research, one that aims to introduce the aesthetics of experimental-music to music therapists, for a variety of reasons. Currently, I believe that the most pressing of these justifications relates to contemporary issues surrounding race and representation.

Although I am still overwhelmed by the internal and external heterogeneity illustrated by the writing on each of the models and approaches detailed in music therapy literature, this diversity comes with some caveats that will be of no surprise to current practitioners in the UK. For example, a search through the biographies of the sixty-nine contributors named in the previous three editions of the *British Journal of Music Therapy*, revealed sixty-four of them to be Caucasian (and an additional four simply had no further online presence). As such, although perhaps imprecise in of itself, this short survey further illustrates the inferences I had already received during conversations with practising music therapists in the UK: that a great white elephant is sitting stubbornly under a perpetually-proliferating avalanche of theoretical diversity.[2] Clearly, valuable efforts are already underway to address these imbalances and I don't intend to undermine their significance.[3] However, this commentary will endeavour to approach the situation from a relatively novel vantage point—that of radical musicological perspectives and avant garde postconceptual music-making. Specifically, these contemporary theorisations of musical analysis and musical composition will here be instrumentalised in the exploration of two questions addressing the future of music. The first of these revolves around concerns surrounding how to deal with existing musics in music therapy, while the second takes steps towards imagining the forms therapeutic music may take in the future.

To consider my first question, it is clear that recognising the limitations of historical music therapy practices, and criticising the monopoly held on them by discourses and materials lifted from the Western Classical tradition, is an important step that is always worth retracing.[4] Therefore, this commentary will reinscribe these efforts below. Yet, a critique of historical practice (or historical works) often counterintuitively leaves behind a vacuum that is most often filled by simply reinstating the old relics to their favourable positions, with little consideration for the cost of this return, even if these relics are reinstated with a measure more self-awareness than before. In instances such as these, Mozart's Requiem still occupies the same position, even if our relationship with the piece has changed—a nuance which can't help but preach only to the already converted, and subsequently does little to shape external perceptions of professional practice. Luckily, there are other paths that can be taken concurrently, and these all move ambitiously towards preempting the forms that music may one day take in therapy.

The first alternative is to replace materials from the Western canon with existing materials from other traditions, and it is clear that a significant number of researchers are working towards this end.[5] However, this article will deal with the more ephemeral question of what music in therapy may become, and it will take as its starting point the dematerialisation of the art object—a process which occurred primarily during the evolution of conceptual art in the 1960s (Lippard, 2001).[6]

Although the conceptual phenomenon of dematerialisation first entered contemporary art discourses over half a century ago, this allows us to understand the impact it has had on modern art practices across the globe, and to compare its effect with that of the aesthetics of post-war conceptualism's musical counterparts. For example, whereas there may today be concert halls in most of the world's major cities, I would argue that these institutions preserve canonic works in a manner alien to that illustrated by galleries of contemporary or modern art. And, even discounting the contemporaneity of a gallery's works, these sites are more frequently filled with wider varieties of artists and practices, despite the fact that both of these musical and artistic institutions have

been metaphorically built upon the foundations of an ineradicable, Western Classical hegemony. Perhaps for this reason, over the past decade antecedents from conceptual art have been instrumental in belatedly provoking calls for an expanded conception of music,[7] and there is cause for hope that decentering sound in musical works may similarly invite a more diverse membership into the participation, and criticism, of the future of contemporary music.

Over the remainder of this commentary, I will first present a criticism of historical music practices and an introduction to the recent, rigorous decentering of sound in musical analysis, before presenting two post-sonic compositions taken from the field of experimental-music and exploring their relevance to music therapy specifically.

Iconoclasm in Experimental-Music and New Musicology

Although far from utopian, experimental composition has found a home simultaneously outside and inside the boundaries of the Western Classical tradition. A critique of the cultural imperialism too-often inferred by Western art-music afforded the emergence of a tradition which has attracted composers who often remain disenfranchised with the neoclassical avant-garde (such as this British-Asian author).[8] As such, while it is beyond the scope of this text to detail a comprehensive history of experimental composition,[9] it is worth mapping out a condensed timeline which illustrates various stages of experimental-music's relationship with the Classical canon and its discourses.

An appropriate starting point is a text that has already proved influential to the theorisations of a number of music therapy approaches—Christopher Small's *Musicking*, which predominantly consists of the description of a typical symphonic performance (Small, 1998).[10] Through uncovering the implications of the behaviours performed by all the stakeholders in these events (from musicians, to audience members, box-office staff, and beyond), Small reveals notions of transcendental harmony, genius composers, and many of the other foundational associations attached to the Classical tradition to be illusionary constructions built upon, and reinforced by, the rituals of concert music etiquette and its historical reception. Small's unmasking of a symphonic performance provides an early iteration of an emerging new musicology that repeatedly distanced itself from conventional readings of the Classical canon. However, in an increasingly-radical manner over the three decades since Small's ideas were first published, and with repeated references back to the dematerialisation of the art object, recent philosophies and analyses of music have distanced themselves not only from the authority of the Classical tradition, but from the authority of sound itself. The most provocative example of these recent re-readings of music is arguably G. Douglas Barrett's *After Sound: Toward a Critical Music* (2016).[11]

Barrett (2016), an interdisciplinary artist and theorist, goes beyond Small's unmasking of concert music's mystification strategies, and argues that the Classical tradition spanning from Beethoven to Brahms[12] represents an interruption (rather than the pinnacle) of music's historical trajectory. Barrett begins by vigorously undermining the disproportionate emphasis placed on sonic materials (harmony, pitch, rhythm, tempo, etc.), in the theorisations and reception of Romantic-era music, arguing that the influence of these lingering assumptions has burdened us with a critical armoury that is ill-equipped to deal with a plethora of musical meanings and materials that are not sonic. Importantly, Barrett notes that this critical armoury is still utilised ubiquitously in all manners of musical analysis today. Consequently, Barrett offers an alternative critical approach to music that drastically relegates the importance placed on sounding properties in order to uncover the limitations of a Romantic methodology and the repercussions of its continued use. Barrett labels his contemporary framework as a critical approach to music "after sound." The rest of the publication continues to explore the political ramifications of various performances through musical analyses which pointedly pay almost no attention to sonic materials. Importantly, these post-sonic analyses also extend an invitation to compositional practices that similarly pay a dramatically-reduced attention to sound.

While Barrett's arguments are perhaps necessarily exaggerated, they argue for a renegotiation with the stubborn remnants of the Romantic era of the Classical tradition, and in doing so they also illustrate solutions to much of the academic uneasiness that has often problematised both Classical and neoclassical music. Specifically, within the context of decolonisation, although Barrett doesn't deal explicitly with these concerns, his text implies that it is not enough for music practitioners in the West to simply approach, recognise, assimilate, and promote many more musics. Instead, music itself must be decentered, and our critical and analytical vocabularies require a similar neutralisation in order to evade an imperialism perpetuated through the conversations we have about music, not just through the music we choose to talk about. It is for this reason that substituting one music for another in the interests of decolonisation is most productive when these substitutions are enacted alongside a change of the vocabulary we use to discuss music, and a revised conception of the nature of music itself. And at this point, parallels with the dematerialisation of the art object become all the more convincing.

Post-Sonic Music

As noted in the introduction to this commentary, a critique such as that presented by Barrett leaves a vacuum, or more appropriately—a silence. Therefore, in order to fill this empty space, the following section presents two descriptions of post-sonic composition, in order to give form to this philosophical aesthetic. These descriptions[13] provide exemplary accounts of a decentered music practice, and they are followed by an examination of the potential affordances of a post-sonic music to contemporary music therapy.

Kia

Kia is a composer from Sheffield. They studied a Bachelor's degree in Music and have gone on to compose for the now-defunct medium of Vine, even though the internet platform they utilise has been shut down. Vine was a video-sharing social media network, where users would upload short snippets of video (vines) that were capped by the platform at a duration of seven seconds. The application became hugely popular, especially with teenagers, though a frequent criticism of the content format was that it was indicative of the reduced attention-span of millennials, with the implication being that this corresponded with a general lack of motivation in Generation Z. Kia argues against this interpretation, explaining that:

> I found these presumptions to be close-minded and needlessly disparaging. Rather than provoking carelessness or apathy in its users and creators, I believe Vine encouraged hyper-analytical thought processes, whereby tone, content, narrative, and contrasts all had to be evaluated, deduced and arranged into just 7 seconds of material. Vine is the illustration of modernised efficiency and a poetic manipulation of miniature material, coupled with an over-abundance of digital media; even before the platform was shut down, the sheer number of vines uploaded resulted in hundreds of thousands of snippets of material existing unseen but by the eyes of their creators.

> I've chosen to continue to compose occasional works which are exclusively for Vine; I've manipulated archived versions of the application in order to send the vines I create on a journey towards their own cyber-disintegration. I find it cathartic, especially as a young composer whose conventional pieces are rarely performed, as it reminds me of the enjoyment I receive from the act of composition, and the autonomy I can still afford to that pursuit. Lately, I've been recording one second of audio on each day of the week, and every Sunday I'll mesh these collages together, and post the package off on its way into cyberspace, without listening to the sounds myself. I like to imagine these little mosaics existing as bubbles somewhere in another world—bubbles which have yet to be popped by the provocation of perception, or tainted by the necessity for recognition.

Raja

Raja is a composer from Bradford who moved to Manchester for their studies. Their piece—*Bumble:Be(e)*, consists of individual sheets of A5 card. The top half of each sheet is occupied by the title of the work and an empty rectangular box, while the bottom half is dotted with bullet-points and blank spaces. Raya abandons these scores in communal areas across their university campus, and during the summer they occasionally set them on miniature wooden easels, and place them next to the bodies of dead bees. The reverse of these scores contain instructions which give participants the option of sending their completed scores (or photos of their completed scores) back to Raya.

> This piece is a reflection on the absence of sound, and a meditation on the interpretations imposed upon symbols; a few of the other composers on my course use emojis in otherwise conventionally-classical scores. Bumble:Be(e) also examines mediation—the piece came about last summer, when every day on my walk to the train station I would traverse pavements littered with the bodies of fallen bees, some dying and some already dead. I'd get distressed, and when I spoke about this with my friends, we all mentioned that we'd seen a post circulating on Facebook saying how you could revive some of these bees with a sugar-and-water solution. We all agreed that we had found this advice reassuring, although ultimately none of us had ever gone to the trouble of actually enacting this intervention.

> This piece is primarily an introspective exercise (though I've been sent some achingly-detailed portraits of dead bees). Personally, when I think about the piece, it reminds me of movement, displacement, and people in transit. It reminds me of the Arianna Grande concert in Manchester, the American artist flying here from the states, the bomber at Victoria station, and my friends who are still having therapy to help move on, or past, or with, or through, the things they saw that night. It reminds me of the days after the event—the resurrection of the Manchester worker-bee as a symbol of hope and resilience, and my housemate who died in a Manchester hotel room on the night of a Tinder date, with a bee tattooed on her shoulder. It reminds me of the dating app Bumble, emblazoned with bees, which spiked in popularity after the Manchester bombings, it reminds me of the buzz of my phone, and it makes me think about death and destruction, communication and guilt. For me, the piece represents rhizomes, speculative realism, the environment, and a hive of inter-connectivity between places and people and technologies and media and things. The piece is about be(e)ing.

The works of Kia and Raja engage with contemporary attitudes towards media, identity, anonymity, loss, anxiety, society, culture, protest, trauma, technology, communications, and relationships in a manner that can be seen to decenter conventional music, and sound itself, in a number of ways. In the case of Kia's composition, the composer utilises unconventionally short durations for their musical works, an aesthetic which is reinforced through the ephemerality of the e-media itself and Kia's refusal to listen to the work they create. Furthermore, this silence of the work, or the not hearing and the not being heard that is presented in the work, is arguably more powerful than the audio that Kia composes and discards. Similarly, Raja's composition positions a silence at the heart of the work, this time the absence of the buzz from a bumblebee. It is to this silence that a deluge of intimate and personal memories are attached, alongside a participatory element that utilises mixed media. The result is an exploration of an absence of sound through a mixture of undetermined materials, interventions, images, and dialogue.

This brief overview evidences the ways by which these two composers decenter sound in their music, yet what does a decentered music afford to music therapy, and how may it expand contemporary practice?

The two compositions firstly illustrate the benefits of considering a pre-sonic form during music-making. While many improvisational (or compositional) approaches to music therapy instrumentalise sonic forms in the generation or analysis of musical materials (such as sonata form, strophic form, or simple ternary structures outlined by contrasts between various sonic elements of musical material), Kia and Raja's work evidences the degree to which any of these selections are constrictive. In the case of each composer, the forms that their music-making takes, which in various ways are not marked by sound, are integral to the meaning of the composers' work and their

individual expression. And, this raises the possibility that a therapist's imposition of a sonic form onto a therapeutic musical intervention may not always be in the interests of a client. Or, to exaggerate this point, there is the potential for any such imposition to result in the creation of noise, as the two compositions above illustrate two situations where silence, for each, is pregnant with meanings that sounds themselves would not be able to sustain. In fact, sounds and audiation would mask, if not entirely destroy, these meanings, the composers' expressivity, and their communication.

However, this is not to say that a post-sonic music is always inevitably a silent music, and "Meme" music provides a contemporary incarnation of this aesthetic seemingly far removed from the confines of academia and the gallery arts. Meme compilations and remixes of Smash Mouth's "All Star" take the form of videos uploaded to Youtube, presenting media that repeatedly refers to the original song, rather than replay it in its entirety. The implication that follows is that the interest in these pursuits lay not in the sonic novelty of these montages and edits,[14] but in the co-authored (and amateur) exploration and incessant transformation of the cultural object that is Smash Mouth's "All Star." This endeavour is arguably as philosophical as it is playful. And, while the allusions memes in general make towards postconceptualism have already been illustrated,[15] meme music is here referenced in order to draw attention to a decentering of sound already proliferating in popular culture. Again, to put it simply—the meanings of these works can certainly be expressed musically, even if they can't be played on a piano.

To associate music primarily with sound (or to define it solely by its relationship to tonal harmony) is a choice—albeit a choice that has been taken up almost ubiquitously since the Romantic era, particularly within institutions and professional practices that maintain close relationships with the Classical tradition. Yet, each time a therapist takes this assumption for granted they delimit and prescribe the nature of music itself for the client. For it is arguable that the foundational element of all music-making is not sound itself, but music's relationship to sound. And, while this conclusion may seem far-fetched, it is worth returning once more to the dematerialisation of the art object, and the effect this decentering has had on modern art—where an expansion of the media and mediums of visual art drastically altered the demographic and diversity of its contributors through a radical (and practical) reconsideration of what art itself was.

Towards a Post-Sonic Music Therapy

The sentiments behind these conclusions are far from revolutionary, even if their particularities may be.[16] To point to only a handful of examples: feminist and culture-centered perspectives on music therapy have been well-received in spite of their relative novelty; the holistic and reflexive nature of Community Music Therapy is wholly complementary to an expanded reading of music;[17] Erinn Epp (2007) has provided a particularly persuasive argument for the wariness with which romantic tropes must be handled in music therapy; and, Colin Lee (2016) summarises the dangers of a stagnating music therapy and practitioners who "use music yet seem unaware of its complexities" (p. 518). Lee continues, "Music therapy has developed its language from the foundations of popular tonal music. It is now crucial that the profession looks to broadening its horizons. Music therapy needs to be contemporary, both clinically and musically" (p. 528).

For clarity, a decentering of sound in music therapy practice need not result in an environment where the Classical tradition and the musical materials it gave birth to are considered of no value. However, I am certainly advocating a position from which the relevance and limitations of these historical materials are regularly articulated, and additionally, that alternative, novel conceptions of music are explored. For, while it is clear that much work is being done to reconsider the future of existing music(s) in therapy, it appears as though much more could be done to explore music(s) of the future in therapy. And, in a similar vein, while a great deal of attention is currently being

paid to an expansion of client diversity in music therapy, I believe much more could be done with respect to practitioner diversity in music therapy, and decentering music may be especially valuable in addressing this latter concern.

To conclude, it is worth highlighting the nature of the presentations offered at the biennial BAMT conference in 2018, which was curated around the themes of "Music, Diversity, and Wholeness." Despite the encouragement proffered by the theme towards discussions of race and professional diversity, the 372-page book of abstracts only once begins to broach the boundaries of a discussion surrounding the identities of music therapists in this manner.[18] Whereas, numerous papers appear to implicate discussions of diversity in practice, diversity in theory, or diversity with regards to the recipients of music therapy.[19] In this respect, Lo Ming Cheng's advocacy for "the need to de-naturalize and problematize the 'non-ethnic' (and 'asexual' for that matter) images of professions" is arguably more pertinent than ever (2002, p. 107). And I believe these endeavours require a consideration not only of our relationship to existing and historical music or the frameworks we employ to arrest and evaluate it, but also an ambitious exploration of what music may become in music therapy. To this end, radical musicological perspectives, and decentered compositional aesthetics pursuing a music "after sound" offer two illustrations of a necessary desire to remain proactive and progressive musically and creatively, as well as critically, in contemporary music therapy.

About the Author

Aaron Moorehouse is a PhD composer studying at Bath Spa University's Open Scores Lab—a research group exploring novel approaches to scoring and new modes of music-making. His thesis investigates how music therapy frameworks may be used to draw attention to the psychosocial impacts of non-therapeutic music practices—subsequently illustrating that these impacts are present in any musical act, and encouraging composers to develop a vocabulary with which to address the psychosocial implications of their creative practices. Similarly, his own creative practice problematises the methods by which academic institutions draw distinctions between ethical and unethical creative practices (as well as the situations in which such distinctions are deemed necessary), and he often deliberately provokes hesitancy in order to uncover where these boundaries lie. Aaron's work repeatedly manipulates and subverts various framing devices, and also makes frequent use of a multitude of other postmodern and postconceptual techniques—including fictocriticism and dematerialisation.

Notes

1. Claire Bishop questions the purpose of this rejection, especially when participatory works are explicitly conceived in order to benefit the lives of various individuals and groups (Bishop, 2004, 2012).

2. Imbalances of this nature become implicated in discussions of art, professionalisation, and academia as a whole, and have been highlighted with greater urgency alongside the recent Black Lives Matter protests. And, while I am not suggesting that these imbalances are unique to music therapy, I would argue that they do appear to be exaggerated within this field, and to a greater degree than in contemporaneous music practices similarly built upon the Classical tradition.

3. For example, practically, the Nordoff-Robbins Centre in London offered two fully-funded places for BME applicants in 2020—an effort which acknowledges a concern and a desire for change, even if I was unable to find statistics which highlight these racial imbalances quantitatively.

4. From a theoretical standpoint, it is clear that music therapy researchers regularly expand music therapy practice in all manner of directions, from implementing indigenous frameworks (Kenny, 1987), to introducing the criticism of Eurocentric perspectives (Kigunda, 2004) and even Romanticism itself (Epp, 2007).

5. And the 2021 *Voices* special issue on Black Aesthetics provides a commendable example of this commitment.

6. During this period, the notion that visual art's form is primarily spatial (an assumption which most easily accommodates objects such as paintings and sculptures) was superseded by the notion that visual art's form is primarily temporal (an assumption which also accommodates time-based processes and various performances and spectacles). On the other hand, since music's temporal existence has rarely been questioned, decentering music (or expanding the musical field) usually refers to de-emphasising the importance of sound in musical works - a preliminary step which can then be instrumentalised in underscoring music's spatial properties.

7. A revision which makes the role of Fluxus in the formation of conceptual art all the more interesting (Cramer, 2019).

8. Nowadays, avant-garde and neoclassical labels often fail to tell us anything meaningful regarding the materials utilised by each body of music, and Marvin Carlson's *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (2013) is illustrative of the tangled relationships between modernism and postmodernism in much contemporary art today. However, these labels are retained here in order to simplify a complicated argument.

9. However, if desired, see John Cage (2012), Michael Nyman (1999), BW Joseph (2008) John Lely and James Saunders (2012), and Jennie Gottshalsk (2016).

10. Although Small summarises these ideas with a refreshing degree of efficiency, they are indebted to a much longer dialogue between music and sociology. DeNora (2003) provides a helpful introduction to these ideas that will already be familiar to many music therapists, and Ansdell (2003) provides a nuanced overview of new musicology and its relevance to contemporary music therapy.

11. The notion of music-after-sound appeared previously in Seth Kim Cohen's *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (2009). However, Barrett (2016) is critical of a number of Seth Kim Cohen's postulations. See also *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (Krauss, 1979).

12. For clarity, the implication here is not that the music of composers from either before Beethoven or after Brahms falls outside of the Classical tradition. Instead, Barrett argues that the discourses produced in the time between these two composers gave birth to a critical vocabulary which has been retrospectively applied to the analysis of earlier Classical works, while simultaneously remaining the most prominent critical strategy in the analyses of *any* music undertaken today in the West.

13. These descriptions were first published in part by *Riffs*—a popular studies music journal with a focus on experimental writing (Moorehouse, 2021).

14. A particularity which is at least partly necessitated by YouTube's copyright algorithms.

15. See Best, 2018.

16. I have yet to encounter an approach to music therapy which intentionally places a constricting definition of music at the heart of its practice, and I am aware that the MA Music Therapy courses in the UK encourage students to consider music from outside the Western Classical tradition—clearly an important exercise when most student music therapists in the UK also have an undergraduate degree in Classical Music. However, even when other musics are discussed in the literature, they are often spoken about as if they are Western music; again, Barrett (2016) argues for a reconsideration of how we talk about and approach music, and it is worth pointing out the uncomfortable similarities that descriptions of all kinds of music in music therapy often share with the descriptions of music offered by aristocratic characters in Victorian-era fiction.

17. Indeed, Stige and Aarø (2011) note that Community Music Therapy shares a closer affinity to relational, conceptual, and performance art, in comparison to the visual art practices (such as painting) that have more often been used as metaphors to describe music therapy (p. 228).

18. Monique McGrath's paper exploring the ethical implications of a Western music therapist practising in post-colonial Africa offers this solitary exception.

19. Clearly, an examination of abstracts is an investigative strategy that is illuminating and reductive in equal measure. For example, while it is feasible that a handful of specific presentations (such as Ian Grundy's) may have interacted with explorations of professional diversity, the abstracts illustrate that this was not one of the primary motivations of any such presentation.

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