

Giacomo Fronzi
**About the aesthetics
of electroacoustic music.
A proposal**

The aesthetic experience
is the same in any art, only the materials differ.

Robert ("Florestan") Schumann

Insofar as we can clearly identify a historical musical context
in which electronic music can be placed,
it is absolutely legitimate to recognize its status of music
in the true meaning of this term.

Carl Dahlhaus

1. *About electroacoustic music*

It is hardly disputable that, nowadays, almost any (music) production or listening experience is mediated by an electric, electronic or digital component that makes electroacoustic music a constant, extensive, and familiar presence, more than we can imagine, but still something hardly comprehensible, difficult to define, understand and interpret: "e-music's ground is [...] selectively sticky, given how it seems, on the one hand, to say that it defies definition and, on the other, to embrace so many" (Saiber 2007: 1616).

Throughout the 1950s, western arts (but actually not only the western ones) lived a new regeneration phase. After the

radical break (with the past tradition) occurred between the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, in the second half of the past century, the innovating tendencies we normally consider converging in the notion of "neo-avant-garde" began gain ground. Within the sphere of the new musical vanguards, a special place should be assigned to the so called "electroacoustic music".

Electroacoustic music, rather than a circumscribed territory, should be considered a continuously expanding galaxy. This depends on several internal and external factors. The constitutive relation existing between this kind of music and technology in the compositional, performing, and interpretative practice leads unavoidably to a further development of the former resulting from the development of the latter. This consideration needs a clarification regarding the right order (both logical and chronological) to be assigned to what we call *music* and to what we call *technology*, with reference to electroacoustic music.

When we talk about "electroacoustic music" what do we refer to? The history of 20th century music – as mentioned – was deeply changed by the burst in its enclosure of electric, electronic and digital technologies. Except for the futurist musicians' attempts to demolish the general system of the academia by imposing a vision of the musical composition intended as an experience fully based on noise, it was only in the late 1940s that more organized attempts to create music works without using traditional instruments, but instead electric and electronic devices, began to emerge. The places where this experience began were Paris, Cologne, Milan and the Unites States. In this "newborn" phase of electroacoustic music, fundamental were

not only the "concrete" works by Pierre Schaeffer, those by Karlheinz Stockhausen (as *Studie I* and *Studie II*), but also some works as *Ritratto di città* (1955-56) by Berio and *Maderna or Thema. Omaggio a Joyce* (1958) by Berio.

In the meantime, also based on the debate aroused by the conference "Première decade de musique experimentale" (1953), in the United States a distinction between "Tape music" (Columbia University) – linked to the work of Vladimir Ussachevsky and Otto Luening – and "Music for magnetic tape" – primarily linked to John Cage, David Tudor, Earle Brown, and Morton Feldman, was formalized. These were feverish years in which the most attentive composers were living a season of experimentation that seemed to have demolished once for all the ties with (the previous) music tradition, which was more and more experienced as a monumental, gigantic set of rules devoid of any significance.

Therefore, on first approximation, electroacoustic music is one of the answers mid-20th century composers tried to give to the immobility and silence of a musical panorama stalled at Webern's bedside¹. However, the world of electroacoustic music is actually much wider than one can imagine. Within it, we can identify innumerable "regions" and "sub-regions", as Barry

¹ About the "filiation" relationship existing between electronic music and serial music, both Gianmario Borio and Carl Dahlhaus remarked its difficulties. If, on the one hand, it is sure that electronic music in the 1950s – also to support its acceptance and legitimacy – was rooted in "an aesthetic background that fundamentally departed from the premises of serial music" (Borio 1993: 82), on the other hand, "we cannot talk about an internal logic or see a historical need for a transition from serial music to electronic music" (Dahlhaus 1999: 25, Author's translation).

Schrader defines them, and as many styles as the composers who dealt with electroacoustic music (see Schrader 1982). The typical terminology of electroacoustic music was born and developed along with this music, its evolution and progress: it originated just *ex musica*.

Leaving definitions aside, there is another element that makes electroacoustic music absolutely peculiar and interesting: the presence of the technological element becomes constitutive of the music work. One of the distinctive features of the contemporary developments of arts consists in the artists' greater "aesthetic" use of solutions developed within the domain of technical and scientific research, to the point that the aesthetic thought was (and still is) continuously called into question by a sequence of pivotal provocations, towards which it seems unable to fully understand its own role, thus missing sometimes its task and continuing to work on an apparatus of categories related to the pre-technological age of artistic production.

Within artistic production, the transition from *techniques* to *technologies* gave origin to a real *mutation*: images, words, sounds, anything that was the result of *bodily actions* becomes now the result of *technological actions*. In addition to this "dispossession", the question that arises is to understand how the artist is present in the work he produces, in the process he puts into effect. Thirdly, technological production leads art to increasingly become a "presentation" rather than a "representation", "but what it *presents* is no longer the 'truth' or the 'significance', but rather the *signifiers* and their *objective logic* or *techno-logic*" (Costa 1998: 70). These elements combine to bring about the irreversible crisis of the traditional aesthetic

categories of "creativity", "subjectivity", "expressivity", etc., the aesthetics of the beautiful or of the ugly, and pave the way to a renewed *aesthetics of the sublime*, or better, an *aesthetics of the technological sublime*.

The question is that this apparently and merely technical and technological revolution contains a more profound sense that goes back to a theoretical and conceptual revolution, typical, we may say, of all radical changes. This is the reason why electroacoustic music must not be separately analyzed and interpreted or, in the best case, considered a step – like the others – in music evolution. It must be considered, instead, a stage of conceptual development within the wider artistic and speculative 20th century horizon.

What I am interested in pointing out now is that another typical characteristic of the electroacoustic revolution consists in the demolition (still an ambiguous and only partially overcome process) of the barriers existing between classical and pop music. It cannot be denied that the history of *popular music* has developed in independent forms and modes compared to those of cultured music. Nonetheless, there have been many opportunities of contact, dialogue, and interchange. It is not the case to retrace them here, but no doubt that there have been several contaminations, even if this "communication" has not always been mutual. Though not intentionally, "classical" electroacoustic music has influenced, above all, "pop" electroacoustic music. The same happened in the case of *rock* and *dance music*. The constant integration of electronic equipment with the traditional instruments of rock gave birth to a new kind of link – though at a purely technical level – between the main genres of electronic music, a link that is one of the few

still existing today. A merely artistic relation proved, instead, more occasional, due to too many stylistic and generically "conceptual" differences. Some intrusions made by rock and pop musicians in new kinds of sounds were only temporary and discontinuous in results. In several cases, groups searching for a new identity capable to characterize them, experimented, in the early phases of their career, the most bizarre possibilities offered by sound synthesizers and electronic equipment, though later on they went back, in their following development phases, to more traditional repertoires. Nonetheless, the electronic evolution of rock is now a given, as well as the fact that some experimental rock groups of the 1960s explicitly referred to the cultivated electroacoustic experience, such as Can, Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, Sonic Youth, Cabaret Voltaire, Stereolab, Aphex Twin, and so on. These examples, which differ from one another and can be brought back to even very distant music traditions, shed light on an aspect – which did not weigh as much on the spreading of electroacoustic music but instead on the growth of the debate around it – concerning the elusive nature of this kind of music.

Electroacoustic music, for this reason, offers some opportunities that – somewhat provocatively – I would define "of redemption" for musical aesthetics, music philosophy, and musicology, as well as for the *underground*, either journalistic or extra-academic, musical critique. The history of electroacoustic music demands us to pay due attention to its fathers and to its innumerable children and stepchildren scattered all over the world. However, it also means to privilege a "pop" perspective, that is to say, a perspective capable to open to the whole territory of music (also in the forms of rock, pop or dance music).

As a matter of fact, the “establishment” of official or academic musical critique has always ignored, for example, the figure of the disk jockey, its history and role, and has substantially snubbed dance music, maybe because it is basically Euro-centred, or perhaps due to a disorientation produced by the absence of words, or its physical rather than cerebral nature (hip hop, with its emphasis on spoken words, and techno music with its obsessive theorizations, are the exceptions that prove the rule) (see Brewster, Broughton 1999). Most likely, it is not only this. The theorists of dance music are usually relatively young journalists or musical critics, who have experienced in some way the *dance revolution*, being interested in studying a phenomenon that upset and reorganized the places and times of young people’s musical entertainment. The official musical critique began dealing with it for the same reasons, that is to say, because the *disco generation* had developed sufficient ability, tools, skills, and expertise to critically analyze a phenomenon that traditional musical critique is hardly able to fathom. It is perhaps the same limit attributable to official critique, which ignored dance music sometimes with a too superficial and snobbish attitude. The same attitude that prevented an illustrious philosopher and music sociologist as Theodor W. Adorno from understanding some works as Stockhausen’s *Gruppen*, *Kontakte* or *Zeitmasse*, while he had no problems in understanding Webern’s late production. This happened not because of an objective incapacity, but because serial and post-serial music seemed to aim at a basically different perception, as far as we can say that music aims at some perception (see Adorno 1992). Most likely, in addition to the elements suggested by Brewster and Broughton, there is also another

reason: a difficulty to understand, which depends on both one's belonging to a pre-dance culture and age, and on the fact that dance music aims at a basically different perception compared to the number of other music genres and styles.

Time has come that the complex world of those who, on a professional basis, think about, discuss, and help to interpret the ongoing changes occurring in the universe of arts, fully accept their tasks and role, and get rid of the theoretical burdens that, besides their unquestionable legitimacy, have prevented them up to now from facing non-classical musical experiences in their complexity and richness, but have also prevented the key players of the pop revolutions from fully understanding their role as heirs of the great tradition of cultivated electroacoustic music.

2. Rationalization of musical means as a new "Supremacy of the object"?

On the speculative horizon of the one we can perhaps consider the only philosopher and sociologist of 20th century music, Th.W. Adorno, the *Neue Musik* – that is to say, the music created within the so-called Second School of Vienna (Arnold Schönberg, Anton von Webern, and Alban Berg), which endorsed, as is well known, the end of the great structural "forms" that had characterized the development of western music over the last three centuries, the attempt to overcome the tonal language (and its alleged naturalness), and achieve an idiom that would have become the new idiom of contemporary world, should be intended as the latest stage, both in logical and chronological terms, in music evolution. One of the characteristics of this process was the tendency to rationalize

the musical means, the first designated victim of which would have become the supremacy of tonality. One of the main purposes of the *Neue Musik* was the creation of an integral work of art, the conclusive stage of a rationalization process of all dimensions connected to the compositional practice, which it is not hard to interpret as the declension in music of the global and radical process of *Aufklärung*, typical of the evolution process of the western man.

Nonetheless, the rationalization process that was first analyzed by Max Weber, examined from a musical point of view, cannot be considered resolved by the serial experience. As regards the relation between "rationalization" and development of musical thought, a theoretical reference that may contribute to place the electroacoustic experience within the general *Aufklärung* process can be found in Weber's essay *Die rationalen und soziologischen Grundlagen der Musik*.

As it is known, Weber identifies in western societies a progressive "rationalization" (*Rationalisierung*) process, resulting from a general "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*), in other words, a progressive detachment from any magical and religious background. Modern societies are characterized by a dynamics that tends to de-sacralize the sphere of myth and completely reduce reality to sets of computable and scientifically controllable objects. It is an "instrumental", purpose-oriented kind of rationality, which penetrates all sectors of society, including music, thus determining the birth of the *tonal system*. Rationalization and standardization find actually an illustrious realization in western music. These theories are brilliantly supported in what can be considered the first essay on music sociology: *Die rationalen und soziologischen*

Grundlagen der Musik (see Weber 1912), published in 1922 after the death of the author, which was intended as the basis of a book on music sociology Weber wanted to write.

As it is known, Weber identified in the rationalization of western culture a decisive element for the rise of capitalism². Part of this rationalization process emerged through the unwieldy role of bureaucracy, the growing capitalistic division of work, and through the organization of all aspects of social life. This bureaucratization process unavoidably involved also the Roman Catholic Church, and had, among its various effects, a rationalization/bureaucratization of the music produced in the ecclesiastical sphere. "Examples of this would be notational systems, structured harmony, organized choirs, ensembles, orchestras, and the standardized construction of instruments" (Turley 2001: 634).

In the theories expounded in *Grundlagen*, though limited to the western world and to the music produced in it³, Weber argued that the transition from primitive to modern music produced the gradual elimination of the mythical, irrational, and magical element, replaced by the rational one. Weber's approach is historical, and develops from the first primitive forms of music focusing then on the rationalization of the interval ratio, exemplarily represented by the *tempered system* (which divides the octave, that is, the sound space between a C and the

² I am referring to the well-known essay *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Weber 1904).

³ As Antonio Serravezza points out, through the choice of an adopted "point of view", Weber identifies a model as preeminent and adapts the other models to it whether directly or indirectly (see Serravezza 1993: 173-209).

preceding or subsequent C in a higher or lower key, into twelve equal halftones). Bach's experience can be situated within this music development and rationalization process, as it is characterized by an undeniable progressive drive, which seems to contain even the serial experience, and, maybe, the electroacoustic one, in its specific relation with the mathematical and computer dimension, since – according to Weber's thesis – rationalization configures itself also as a "musical instrument technology" (Paddison 1993: 226) level. The electronic music of the school of Cologne, as well as stochastic music, are two possible examples in a position to paradigmatically highlight the hyper-rationalization of the composing process, thus confirming and supporting Weber's conjecture of a gradual and inescapable process of estrangement from any mystic and spiritual – as I will argue in the next pages – remainder.

To talk about "mathematization", "technologization", and "automatization" of composing processes means also to perceive the danger – widely announced since the outset of electroacoustic music – of a de-subjectification of these processes, which would end up with a surrender to the "machine", to the object.

In this regard, if we want to resume an antithesis treasured by the classical German Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophical school, the history of music intended as a development of musical ideas deeply rooted in the tonal ground seems to recall, in some way, the so-called "*Vorrang des Subject*" (priority of the subject). On the contrary, the dodecaphonic developments, and even more, the post-Webernian electroacoustic ones seem to overturn this perspective, which is closer to the so-called "*Vorrang des Objekts*" (priority of the object).

Ultimately, the antithesis traditional music versus new music seems to propose again, from a musical point of view, the antithesis priority of the subject versus priority of the object. We shall try to clarify this apparently odd passage.

Adorno's critical thought, strongly lined up against any systemic, conservative, totalizing, and reifying logic, against any kind of thought (including thought itself) that claims to overstep any mediation and contradiction, replies to Hegel's bourgeois "priority of the subject" with the provocative "priority of the object" a critique of identity cannot avoid to move to, even if by groping in the dark (see Adorno 1973: 183-97).

This thesis – which aims at neutralizing the totally idealistic principle of "constitutive subjectivity" – far from implying a decrease in the activity of the subject within the moral and cognitive process, drives to attribute new and true freedom to the subject, out of its claim of supremacy, opening incessantly, through a permanent self-reflection, to the infinite determinations of the object. Furthermore, this permanent self-reflection is nothing but the cognitive activity of the subject, which in front of the object (which can be thought only by the subject, but always remains for it an "Other") discovers its infinite determinations through a continuous mediation process.

Therefore, we can easily understand also the admiration and the favour Adorno expressed to a composer as Gustav Mahler – most likely the true link between Ludwig van Beethoven and modern music – who succeeded in escaping the grips of the supremacy and "affirmation" of the subject, since he aimed at an objective totality that nonetheless succeeds in neither sacrificing anything, in terms of subjective differentiation, nor in surreptitiously grasping its own subjectivity (Paddison 1993:

259). The greatness of Mahler's music, in the perspective by which Adorno analyzed and interpreted the developments of western music, lies in the fact that Mahler never succeeded in expressing affirmation. Its triumph is its failure, its victory lies in its defeat, which does not contain anything shameful.

It means that the contrast between subject and object is linked to affirmation or to negation. The supremacy of the subject corresponds to an affirmative dialectics. The supremacy of the object corresponds to a negative dialectics. If we want to take this perspective to extremes, would the gradual strengthening of the role played by technology, electronic instruments, and semi-autonomous instruments, as well as by uncertainty and indetermination taken as a method, represent the affirmation of the supremacy of the object over the subject, which is now dispossessed and subordinated to a pervasive technique that avails itself of an overwhelming logic? The subjectivity and individuality of the composer give way to the objectivity and rationality of the technical and aesthetical means. The supremacy of the subject is reversed and becomes the supremacy of the object. But is it really so?

The composing tendencies from the second post-war period onwards, Adorno writes, "tend to react to it by renouncing any control of their music by their ego. They prefer to drift and to refrain from intervening, in the hope that, as in Cage's *bon mot*, it will be not Webern speaking, but the music itself. Their aim is to transform psychological ego weakness into aesthetic strength" (Adorno 1992: 283). One of the most frequent critical remarks against a composer as Cage, in fact, consists in charging him of having definitively abandoned any artistic intentionality and subjectivity in his composing practice. A sort of final

self-sacrifice, similar to the one performed by the subject, which in late-capitalistic society renounces its requests, and passively succumbs to the strict and unchangeable rules of the system. As for Cage, it was fundamental for him to move from an openly “communicative” conception of music, rooted in an internal structure of the composition, to a sort of “poetics of evanescence” (Daniel Charles), through a progressive stepping back of the Ego from the procedures of composition, resorting to casual operations (see Boulez, Cage 1990), however without giving up a strict *composing ratio*.

It means that the object does not replace the supremacy of the subject: they do neither stand one in front of the other without any mediation, nor does the object (the machine) place itself as something unknown to the subject. With the birth and development of electroacoustic music, both noise and musical sound seem nothing but particular cases in the virtual universes of possible worlds. It means that we should start exploring this new world, controlling it, and submitting it to new rules, even if we may be bewildered by the opacity the material nature of these unheard sounds opposes to our will to know and dominate. The tendency to completely control the composing parameters and processes, even if it begins within the subject, finds its conclusion out of it.

The issue “object” does not cease to demand further analyses. One of them undoubtedly concerns the concept of “sound object”. Schaeffer’s literary production makes the peculiar notion, full of implications, of *objets musicaux* come to light (see Schaeffer 1966). This notion underlines the singularity of musical events, or better, sound events Schaeffer moves from to conceive the recording of individual sounds and noises. The

musical object is sound itself, considered in its merely auditory nature, it is an "acousmatic effect" we perceptively focus on, regardless of the source.

Moreover, the theme of "sound object" or "musical object" refers to other issues, in particular the one concerning the new relationship that, in the course of 20th century, the artist establishes with reality, and namely with everyday reality. Schaeffer's and all acousmatic composers' (but not only them) concrete process rests on the same principles proposed by Marcel Duchamp at the beginning of 20th century. Both Duchamp's *readymades* and Schaeffer's clattering noises of saucepans aim at leading the audience to discover a further sense of things: their unexpected and "indifferent" beauty (as defined by Duchamp).

It is one of the innumerable examples of how electroacoustic music lends itself to be analyzed and interpreted when placed into a wider context, within which the philosophical and aesthetic thought aims at identifying possible research and analysis paths. In Italy, these studies can be currently considered at an early stage, even if the work of individual scholars has already produced some definitely important results. Nonetheless, this research field seems to encounter greater difficulties than other areas. But, then, we should ask ourselves what these difficulties are connected to. Has perhaps this field such a mellifluous and undefined identity as to make its success as a research area provided with the same dignity as the others particularly complex? In the 1990s, Gianmario Borio maintained that "An aesthetic theory of electronic music has not yet been written, and it is debatable whether this can be done inde-

pendently of an aesthetic theory of New Music" (Borio 1993: 77).

To talk about the aesthetics of electroacoustic cannot mean, in any case, to propose a monolithic and inclusive theory of this musical genre, as it involves a variety of themes and problems that reject the idea of a unitary aesthetics. It is only possible to take on a very moving and flexible point of view capable to produce equally moving and flexible interpretations, by setting an intensification and an explanation of the polyvalent discourse of electroacoustic music as an attainable goal.

3. Music "de-musicalization" and new frontiers for theory. About the aesthetics of electroacoustic music

Does at the basis of electroacoustic music exist a musical thought we can attribute a philosophical value to? Is it possible to talk about an "aesthetics of electroacoustic music"? The difficulty to answer these questions refers to the general complexity of the discipline called "musical aesthetics", intended as a subset of aesthetics. And it is just from there that we should start anew.

As it is common knowledge, aesthetics, meant as an independent discipline provided with its own epistemological theoretical foundations, began to develop in the second half of 18th century, after its "baptism", celebrated by Alexander G. Baumgarten, author of *Aesthetica* (1750), even though the use of the term "aesthetics" can be traced back to another work written by him, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735). In these early stages, linked to the school of Wolff, music remained substantially out of the "sys-

tem of arts", except for Gottlieb Canz, author of *Meditationes philosophicae* (1750).

An imbalance between *visual arts* and *music* immediately emerges. The former keep a privileged and priority relation with imagination; the latter, instead, remains something "natural", but lower in the ranking list compared to the other arts, since it seems limited to a smaller number of images (see Le Rond d'Alembert). Furthermore, the theoretical tradition according to which music is based on harmonic and mathematical structures results, in any case, in the subordination of senses to reason, and, consequently, in greater emphasis placed on the perceptible aspect of music, that is to say, on melody and the pleasure it produces, and, hence, something that cannot be brought back to reason. As for the dualism "music as an object of senses" and "music as science": "The only musical element capable of being dealt with rationally, of becoming the object of philosophical investigation, is harmony in so far as it can be reduced to the abstract study of mathematical ratios between the notes" (Fubini 1990: 148).

In the history of the relation between aesthetics and music, a significant boost was given by Eduard Hanslick. Until the middle of 19th century, music was considered in an absolutely unsystematic, rhapsodic, casual and, hence, basically unprofessional, imprecise, and extemporary way. If this was the general situation, Hanslick, on the contrary, "was affected by his professionalism: he dealt with music with a high degree of competence and deep all-around awareness of all the details involved in each particular problem. This state of things conferred on his writings an altogether new tone" (Fubini 1990: 342). In his works, including the famous essay *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*

(1854), a work in which he laid the foundations of musical formalism, which can be reasonably considered the theoretical manifesto of musical aesthetics as an independent discipline, Hanslick proposes a less generic view of aesthetics and of the beautiful in art, supporting the option of their distinction and specification: the aesthetics of a form of art differs from the aesthetics of another one, since the material is different. The laws of the beautiful in any form of art cannot be divided from the peculiar characteristics of its material, of its technique (see Hanslick 1854), and the beautiful in music has specific characteristics that mark its difference compared to the beautiful in other forms of art. By explaining "the specific 'beautiful in music' *iuxta propria principia*, Hanlick was invalidating, at the same time, the totalizing claims of the idealistic systems along with their burden of forced aesthetic deductions, and the brilliant but unfounded critical intuitions of the romantic writers" (Guanti 1981: 11, Author's translation).

I decided to dwell a little longer on Hanslick's position for a precise reason. Apart from the change in direction it gave to the development of music aesthetics, it can be more usefully referred to in the case of electroacoustic music. However, before analysing this aspect more in depth, we will try to conclude this concise overview of "what" music aesthetics is.

Music aesthetics can be intended – as Enrico Fubini suggests – either in a narrow sense or in a broader sense. In the first case, it would set itself as a "reflection on music at a philosophical and systemic level" (Fubini 2003: 155, Author's translation). It would mean, however, to declare the death of this discipline, since in this sense music aesthetics would *de facto* coincide with music philosophy, the last tremendous

shots of which were fired off by Adorno. Assuming, instead, a broader point of view, "we have to conclude in a less apocalyptic way by simply saying that today, music aesthetics has taken new directions and tends to fragment itself into a number of different research areas referred to the musical experience considered in its complexity and multi-faceted aspects" (Fubini 2003: 156, Author's translation). Antonio Serravezza proposes to set two different boundaries in the region of *cultural topography* we use to call "music aesthetics". On the one hand, "this field does not entirely embrace a reflection on music and its conceptualization, but rather a historical constellation of it, the one concerning an investigation from the point of view of sensitivity and experience", since, on the other hand, "it does not coincide with what pertains to a formally 'aesthetic' sphere, that is to say, to a sector of the philosophical work, but [...] it announces itself with a differentiated variety of expressions that speak with different languages and categorical patterns" (Serravezza 2004: 102-3, Author's translation).

Electroacoustic music contributes to further complicate this picture. Basing on Serravezza's analysis, would a hypothetical *aesthetics of electroacoustic music* set itself as an "investigation from the point of view of sensitivity and experience" or rather as "a differentiated variety of expressions that speak using different languages and categorical patterns"?

The challenge issued by electroacoustic music to aesthetics places the philosophical reflection on these themes between two possible interpretations. Electroacoustic music (considering the wide range it covers, which goes from Schaeffer to Takemitsu, from Pink Floyd to Berio, from Maderna to Avni, from Beatles to contemporary DJs) poses some problems that

cannot be faced making use of the same traditional interpretation tools of the phenomenon called “music”. Electroacoustic music, from a sphere of experiences considered – if not in their erudite version – almost second class, could, instead, succeed in playing an important role to relaunch a discipline – music aesthetics – that risks to remain stuck – just as aesthetics – in debates that taste like ancient *disputationes*, like captivating *querelles* that, nonetheless, do not succeed in saying (or giving) much about the ongoing transformations in the world of contemporary arts and in the world of life, with which there is increasing dialogue⁴. Therefore, it would be appropriate to formulate “an aesthetic theory of recent electronic music, a theory that acknowledges the interconnectedness of aesthetics with culture and society” (Demers 2010: 4). Certainly, Joanna Demers, in her essay *Listening through the noise*, argues that she is proposing an aesthetic theory of experimental electronic music as from the 1980s onwards, even if – in my opinion – it is difficult to propose such a theory, considering the enormous variety of languages, styles, aims, and audiences involved in this musical sector (not to mention the fact that Demers’ analysis is only focused on experimental electronic music as from the 1980s onwards, and therefore intentionally ignores the music produced in the three previous decades).

⁴ Joanna Demers underlined these aspects also in relation to the pressure exerted by new disciplines, which seem more responsive and “modern” than aesthetics and music aesthetics “With multicultural, feminist, gay and lesbian, and postcolonial studies continuing to flourish and generate torrents of ethnographically based scholarship, aesthetics cannot help but appear out dated, if not objectionable” (Demers 2010: 3-4).

Yet, the problem of how to approach electroacoustic music from an aesthetic point of view still remains. Compared to the identification of a single (or unitary) theoretical and methodological (or standardized) perspective, it would prove more effective to allow different directions interacting. A possibility could be provided by a perspective that combines a *contemporary version of Hanslick's formalism* and a *realistic approach*. Electroacoustic music, the subject – as other forms of contemporary art – of the typical dilemma “is it music?”⁵ seems to be part of a wider debate that involves the essence itself of the work of art. Starting from Hegel’s “dissolution of art”, according to which art does not die, but loses its ability to satisfy the genuine and real spiritual needs it had traditionally and historically defended, electroacoustic music – such as art that empties out of “art” – appears as if it had become more “demusicalized” than serial music. Referring to Joseph Kosuth’s *Art after philosophy. The meaning of conceptual art*, Remo Bodei remarks that contemporary art “should become independent and proceed *iuxta propria principia*, thus coming closer, in case, to logic and mathematics rather than figurative art” (Bodei 2013: 26, Author’s translation). In the case of electroacoustic music, we witness a similar process of approach to logic, mathematics, physics, and information technology, by grad-

⁵ To this question referring to the possibility to analyze a score, Dahlhaus gave the following answer: “I do not see the reason why we should deny the right to exist to a kind of music the comprehension of which requires reading a score. To blame all that evades an immediate acoustic perception of being music only on paper reveals narrow-mindedness” (Dahlhaus 1999: 26, Author’s translation).

ually giving up the typical contemplative mark of traditional classical music. In other words, there is a transition to a focus on performance, which is also one of the distinguishing characteristics of both classical and pop electroacoustic music. At the same time, this transition to a focus on performance implies not only the explosion of a "formal" level to the detriment of a contemplative level, but also a progressive adherence to reality, as already underlined. So, an aesthetics of electroacoustic music would result in a combination of *formalism* and *realism*.

As for the first aspect, as we previously mentioned, Hanslick's intention consisted in proposing a new approach to the analysis object, an approach that had, in some way, to get closer to the method used in natural science. Therefore, it was necessary to proceed with the unification of two levels, which until then had been kept rigorously separated: "theoretico-grammatical rules" and "aesthetic research". "The unifying of the two parts, the theoretico-grammatical and the high-flown and sentimental, can take place only if we deny to music any purely emotional content, any power to represent anything, or any direct link with states of feeling" (Fubini 1990: 344). Hanslick rejects any position capable to reduce music to an instrument made to arouse emotions and express feelings; music should be analyzed in itself, within an *aesthetics of the form*, and no longer within an aesthetics of feelings. Thus, Hanslick proceeds by dismantling the romantic aesthetics, and, in general, any research perspective that brings music back to something different from what it is, to external meanings, to representation of feelings.

Electroacoustic music emphasizes the detachment from the typical ecstatic-contemplative dimension of the aesthetic experience. By strengthening, instead, the interactive and relational element, electroacoustic music debunks the myth of the inert passivity and the contemplative nature of the aesthetic dimension, by stressing instead its constitutionally communicative character.

As remarked by José Jiménez with reference to the *contemplative* nature of the aesthetic experience, "*intimacy, ideality, spiritualism, and even, mysticism, together with an idea of passivity and ecstasism, are the aspects that merge in the category of contemplation, that is to say, the way to conceive the acme of an aesthetic experience as stillness, calm, inner peace, through an encounter with ideal beauty favoured by an aesthetic object or by an individual work of art*" (Jiménez 2007: 141, Author's translation).

Of quite another nature, instead, is electroacoustic music, the character of which, markedly perceptive and sensorial, demands the listeners' active involvement (if not their participation), as the force of the *form* of the work inevitably weighs on their aesthetic experience. Electroacoustic music escapes any mediation and slips into the immediacy of the listening and the sensorial transition.

The "return to nature" about which Luigi Rognoni writes in his essay *La musica "elettronica" e il problema della tecnica* (Rognoni 1966) – which contributed to the aesthetic legitimization of electronic music –, he considers the main result of early electronic research, seems to have been explained as a return to human nature, in the sense of exaltation of the animal nature, of the primordial and hyper-sensorial element. The call to

senses, compared to the content of truth, implies – in the case of electroacoustic music – the attempt to propose an aesthetic experience made of one's full immersion in the sound (and one's dragging into dance, for what refers to *pop* electronics). There is no emotional, cognitive, spiritual or mental elevation, but only a kinaesthetic and synaesthetic polarization. Electroacoustic music represents the ultimate attestation of man's surrender to any attempt of establishment and foundation. The basis, the *Grund*, the first principle result fragmented, scattered, changed into splinters of sense electronically processed and reprocessed. It is no longer a matter of creating music for the mind or for the heart, but rather for the senses. Despite the fact that the early composers of electroacoustic music (but also some of the following and contemporary composers) intended to preserve the "humanistic" and "political" aspect of the new music (as, for instance, not only in the case of Luciano Berio, who argued that "the deep sense of electronic music is something shared by any other experience that makes us remind the detail 'man' when we talk about humanity" (Berio 1976: ix, Author's translation), but also in the case of Luigi Nono), the element that asserts itself is a surrender, even irrational, to perceptions, to the *fluxus*, to the landscape and to the sound context as such, solid in itself, that does not represent anything, that does no longer convey any sense. Even from this point of view, electronically produced music has marked a route, has shown a tendency.

It is however necessary to point out that another opposite tendency, which refers to a sort of musical and mathematical hyper-rationalism, developed starting from the hyper-deterministic experience that developed in the milieu of the

elektronische Musik of which Stockhausen was the founding father. The beginnings of his research and experimentations revolve around two focal points: a *radicalization of Webern's lesson* and its *articulation from a technological perspective*. His composing practice can be identified as a "union between scientific thought and serial technique, between Helmholtz's sound physics [Fourier's theorem] and electronic technique, which allows (the composer) to use sine wave sound" (Galante, Sani 2000: 62, Author's translation). From the very beginning, Stockhausen tried to extend the serial process to all the dimensions (height, timbre, intensity, rhythm, etc.), in order to reach an *integral serial design*. The electronic music produced in Cologne in the 1950s was the result of a varied blend of ideological tendencies, revolutionary boost and emancipatory willpower. This result was constructed and organized starting from a substantial hyper-serial and hyper-deterministic trust, stuffed with a considerable dose of neo-positive enthusiasm towards technology. This decisively and rigidly structured approach creates one of the influential traditions of contemporary music, from which, sometimes in a mannerist way, new itineraries have developed, clearly oriented to an almost obsessive clarification and specification of all parameters and phases from composition to performance.

Concerning the second aspect, electroacoustic music⁶ starting from the *musique concrète* has led to the accomplishment of another double redemption: of art and music, on the one hand, and of the everyday element and the "sound" effect, on

⁶ About these topics, see Fronzi 2013.

the other hand, by expressing the alienating power of the artistic fact and the equally amazing, unexpected power of ordinary objects, of an isolated sound, of everyday noise, to create works that present themselves as practical evidences that beauty can be found in the most unexpected places (see Danto 1981)⁷. In abnormal continuity with that kind of urgency, according to which descriptive music has tried to incorporate some clear and explicit references to the real world, electroacoustic music – in its “concrete” version – relaunches and re-establishes a communicative level with the most lively and vital dimension of everyday reality, even when it takes the shape of dissent and objection. Aesthetic thought cannot help but remarking that the orientation indicated by Duchamp has found in electroacoustic music, too, a testing ground for verification and solicitations. A realistic approach to electroacoustic music does justice to this increasingly urgent request for reality and in its electronic making and unmaking (makes this music) more and more attractive.

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⁷ On the relation existing between the numerous practices of electronic music, on the one hand, and the use of sound mediated by technology in the extra-musical and everyday world, on the other hand, see Pietro Polotti 2009: 93-109.

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