Automaton Monk by Anna Rubin

Some thoughts on the use of everyday sound and speech in my acousmatic/electronic music





Sillie

Monk Automaton ca. 1560 by poet Rebecca Morgan Frank



Monk Automaton ca. 1560 in Smithsonian Museum, Washington, DC

Monk Automaton ca. 1560 in Oh You Robot Saints!



Acousmatic music

- Made possible by invention of tape recorder
- 'Cinema for the blind'
- Dramatic intensification of everyday sound, speech
- Emphasis on timbre (sound color) and spectral development (the harmonic/nonharmonic makeup of each sound) as opposed to traditional pitch/harmony
- Influence of Foley & film music (diagetic vs non-diagetic sound), Hörspiel and readers' theatre
- Film sound devices such as the fade & splicing between different images/sounds
- Soundscape







Foley sound effects, Hildegard Westerkamp, Pauline Oliveros, Pierre Schaeffer



Disruption and continuity in electronic/ acousmatic music

- Use of everyday speech and everyday sounds break down rigid borders between concert music, documentary & story-telling.
- Soundscape as a musical practice documents everyday sound environments as well as integrating them into sound art.





Speech as musical material

- Sung and recited poetry as ancient practice in world, court & art musics
- Speech as an even richer source than the sung voice of emotion, mood, information on speaker's class, gender, ethnic background
- Acoustically, speech providing rich harmonic and nonharmonic content for manipulation

Sound spectrum representation

- Shows amount of vibration at each frequency
- Stereo sound file
- Horizontal axis time
- Vertical axis low to high
- Darkest areas are loudest, greatest
- Intensity e.g. at ca. 9", frequencies
- Between ca. 100-1000 Hz or cycles per second are most intense



Monk Automaton ca. 1560

 $Part \ 1 \ {\rm soundfile} \ 2$

Robots can do almost anything you please.

They are up on sexual favors, cordless vacuuming, and martyring themselves by bomb.

Less effective at deep tissue massage; excellent at **listening** to senior citizens.

Working on parking your car.

(Humorous, sarcastic, suddenly violent, then banal.)





$Part \ 2 \ ({\rm soundfile } {\rm 3,4})$

What the future brings is nothing we haven't seen, this quest to be little gods and make what will do our bidding.

The medieval monk who doled out benedictions arose from a ruler's dream and was then fathered by a **clockmaker**.

(Dramatic change in tone to formal, oracular, even prophetic voice. And in the second phrase, we succinctly hear the origin story of the monk automaton.)



Part 3 (soundfile 5)

The real monk now sits alone in the back room, smokes a cigar, enjoys **a glass of whiskey-**he's outsourced the job.

The real monk is on the dole. The real monk is waiting in the **parking lot** for offers of day labor.

The real monk is **unloading boxes** at Costco.

The real monk sits in the **factory, building** himself by hand.

(Robots can do almost anything....)

Tone returns to everyday prose, short phrases, brutal repetition





Some thematic oppositions Bells vs Clocks



- While no bells mentioned, their religious connotation evokes Catholicism, sacred 'monk' time, call to prayer
- Clock time transforms time into secular, economic & political tool to rule people's behavior
- Implicit in poem is deep grief about loss of the sacred
- Prophetic reprimand 'this quest to be little gods and make what will do our bidding'
- Jarring inversion of *'real monk'* from praying robot to wealthy boss smoking cigars and drinking whiskey to impoverished worker (probably immigrant) and ultimately to the robot 'building himself by hand' inversion of Biblical creation story.

Compositional processes

- Clearly spoken text accompanied by processed variants of text
- Anticipation of poetic themes by sound 'preparation' (e.g. ticking clocks before hearing 'clockmaker', fragments of text that are barely understandable then followed by clearly spoken text)
- Repetition to allow for reflection
- Multi-layering to both disrupt and deepen meaning
- Polyrhythmic layering contrasting varying pulses, to disrupt feeling of simple continuity



Acoustic Oppositions

- Bright metallic and clicking sounds vs stretched out extended textures
- Granulated textures vs clarity of naturally spoken text
- Complex textures vs high melodic tones
- Speech fragments/vocal gestures vs complete words/phrases

Granulation as compositional tool



- Sounds split into tiny grains 1-100 msec in length
- Sounds stretched in variable ways
- Spectral (microlevel timbral) content intensified and disrupted Dense accumulations such as the click of a scissors becoming an army of knives;
 - Important words surrounded by their sonic 'shadows'

3-part structure of piece

- Part 1 to Climax 1 'martyring themselves by bomb' early in piece traditional climax of rising, intensifying, loud trajectory (mainly female narrator)
- Part 2 including prophetic 'little gods' polyrhythmic and dense layering (multiple narrators to end of 3A)
- Part 3A- Climax area 2 gradually dominated by vocal fragments; building climax w/ repetitions of 'the real monk'
- Part 3B short recap of opening phrase "Robots can do almost....." (1st female narrator)

Trajectory of Poem



- Gentle humor & sarcasm prose of everyday language
- Sudden intrusion of violence (traditional)
- Banality
- Sudden elegiac, even prophetic tone Shakespearean-like language
- Return of prose
- Biting, jarring images almost text-like in their brevity. Climax 2 Area
- Importance of 'doled out benedictions' and 'on the dole.' Vocal fragments
- NB Costco is a chain of American 'big box' stores

Climax 1

Music