**Hearing the Continuum of Sound** Slide

Thank you Prof. John Rink and the *Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice* for inviting me to give this talk on “Hearing the Continuum of Sound” as part of the *Performance Research Seminars*.

I hope to contribute to the very rich and thought provoking themes on which papers have been given in the context of this series in the past, and am particularly concerned to start this year’s series in an equally inspiring and thought provoking way.

I am not sure you will agree with what I have to say or indeed why I am saying it, as my presentation hinges on what is the rather challenging and contested but also very fruitful and thus worth to consider relationship between sound art and music. However, I will try to persuade you that indeed this relationship is valuable in terms of the practice and criticism of both disciplines, and that thus it should be considered or maybe re-considered. Not to create an unproblematic, linear or homogeneous history, but to investigate the folding, unfolding and refolding of each discipline within each other to expand what sound art is and what music is; how we perform both practices in listening; and how in turn we write about them to persuade others of their communalities and differences that re-evaluate them both.

In the background of this presentation hovers the historical relationship between music and visual arts, and how the material limits of the first have inspired the conceptual framework of the second, while losing listening on the way. The serial works of Arnold Schönberg which inverse the very purpose and standing of 19th Century music: its structure, aesthetic content, ideology and value, while continuing its consequences, find themselves a necessary continuation in the aleatory compositions of John Cage. But while the musical establishment and the audience never really took to Schönberg’s challenge, Cage’s work, his chance operations and silence, were reduced to their idea, which crossed disciplinary boundaries to enrich visual art more than impacting on the future of music.

The reconnection in a backward glance of sound art and music along music’s own lines of necessity and practice, its own unfinished and unfinishable promises, serves not to hide the fractures and differences between the two practices. By contrast, what hides the differences and challenges within musical and sonic practices, and what dispels the consequences these challenges might bring to the actuality, the composing, performance and listening to music and sound work, is, that around 1950, most of music that did not fit the canonical interpretations: music concrete, elektronische musik, improvisation, minimal music, etc. was moved out or moved itself out of the conservatoires to become a separate arena of practice and discourse.

On this background, my objective is to take you on a journey where disparate sonic practices can live in a common discursive and practical universe. Where we can move between for example Henry Purcell, Johan Sebastian Bach, John Cage, Janet Cardiff and Bill Fontana without being impeded by disciplinary boundaries constructed by a critical language that tells us how we are to engage in the heard, and what we are to hear and how we are to value it: what is and what is not music.

An esoteric musicology enables the scholarly discussion of intra-systemic tendencies of the musical work; it determines relationships and values within a musical world, which however remains hermetically sealed from other practices.

In order to open this world to connect with other sonic practices I will be engaging possible world theory: theories on the plurality of worlds developed in the philosophy of logic to establish the sense of the work as a possible world in a universe of possible worlds, that are accessible to each other through this modality. And I will pair those abstract logical worlds with Phenomenological life-worlds, the private worlds of our experience, to inhabit in listening, the possibility rather than the actuality of music. Thus I want to invite you to walk with me through and across music as sonic environments, as sonic possible worlds. I hope to entice you to follow me into the sonic work as into a sonic world which is part of a universe of compossible sonic worlds, made up of sound art works and musical pieces, that we can inhabit, walk through and walk across to compare, critique and cross reference them not along disciplinary lines but from the immersive criticality of listening to both works as equal worlds.

slide

**Sonic Possible Worlds**

The musical work as world, as a sonic possible world, accessible within the modalities of other sonic worlds: other musical worlds as well as sound art works, offers a comparative framework and historical re-evaluation, not based on dates and chronology nor hindered by disciplinary boundaries and discursive givens, but enabled by a critical immersivity: inhabting, and moving through sonic possibilities to explore and compare what the musical work is made of by living in the midst of its sounds.

The way I am using Possible World theory in this context is via the ideas of radical realist David K. Lewis for whom there is no core actual world, actuality is an indexical term. My world is for me a possible actuality while all other worlds, remain possible only, but if I move from one into the next a new one becomes an actual possibility for me. I am combining this radical possibilism with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenological life-worlds: the world, which we experience privately and contingently, and which we generate and reciprocate in this experience but which remains a world for us. This combination of phenomenology and logic means that what for a logician remains an abstract world, used to probe the possibility and necessity of its entities, becomes an inhabited and reciprocal world made from the experience of all there is. Together they allow me to consider the sound art work and music as a sonic possible world that I inhabit as a possible actuality and from which I move into other sonic worlds that become new possible actualities. Through the critical immersivity, the inhabiting of works as worlds, and the critical movement between works as worlds, I can establish a critical framework beyond disciplinary expectations and tendencies.

Sonic possible worlds make accessible and thinkable the relationship between music and sound art not as two separate and distinct disciplines but as worlds made of sound that share possibilities with each other and through each other. This is accessibility as a visceral mobility within and across artworks as worlds that overrides the disciplines’ insistence on givens, reference and value, and draws together seemingly separate works through the possibility of inhabiting them compossibly.

Listening for the possibility of sound in the musical work aims not to come to a structural or post-structural interpretation of works vis-à-vis each other, but tries to augment the sense of one through the practice of the other. Aesthetic accessibility as a material accessibility does not ‘read’ musical sounds versus a sonic materiality, but explores how they unfold through each other. It is not a linear or historical, and neither is it an epistemic accessibility that seeks the idea, data or knowledge respectively, rather it is a ‘pathetic’ accessibility that explores and compares what the work is made of by listening to it as an exploring of its ‘affective geography’: the practice of walking and listening, doing and redoing without a measure or map, along the present materiality, unfolding the unseen in our ears – This geography is triggered by pathetic material of its sound, its sensorial and emotional quality, rather than its visual or musical measure; and it activates a listening as mapping: generating the material heard in the performance of listening. This generative listening builds the work as a possible life-world, as the private and reciprocal experience of its materiality through which we inhabit and understand the work as world.

And it is from this private experience, that is a possible actuality to each of us separately, that through negotiations, through a discourse that starts from this solitary experience and seeks a shared accessibility, that we need to talk about the work. Thus we need to build a language of music and sound art that inhabits the semantic materiality and expresses not where it is from, what I know about it beforehand, nor what it becomes in pure reflection, but what it could be and might go on to be in its contingent experience: to articulate not the lexicon of the discipline, its expectations and rules, but the articulation of the sound, from the experience of walking through the invisible geography of its affective materiality.

To start our journey through sound art works and musical pieces as worlds, not along discourse, but along the invisible lines of a sonic geography I want to listen to

***Forêt profonde* (1996) Slide /sound**

**This is the 5th track of** ofthe 13 tracks of Francis Dhomont’s 1996 album *Forêt profonde* conjure up the possible from the acousmatic, understood as the unseen depth of a visual source, which remains unrecognizable in his sonic processes, providing us instead with the material for its re-imagination.

He calls it the ‘alchemy of the studio’: the power which enchants his sounds to be not a positive source but a thing generated in our presence from the complexity of idiosyncratic sonic material whose meeting converges not in the work but in its extension as a world.

The work progresses uninhibited by disciplinary boundaries and the need for representation, elongating centrifugal rhythms and sounds that have long lost a shared direction but dance around each other into the world to produce variants of their own existence in my ears. It is a deep and dark wood he is guiding us into. The lack of representation and reference creates not nothing but generates the inexhaustible abundance of a present sense. His sounds are all that can be: between my world and his, the plurality of a sonic world emerges as the possibility rather than the actuality of music.

Rhythms and vibrations produce things that do not exist as counterfactual elements of a visual or musical, actual world, but open a view onto an unfamiliar existence that lives unseen as the mobility of sound. Listening we conjure up shapes from invisible sonic movements that live in the reality of the seen as another truth, that is not an untruth but the truth of that which has no reference and no memory to what it was elsewhere and at another time, but which is itself as sound that triggers my memory to create presently what it might be.

In this way his compositions invite us to live beneath the undergrowth in a wild environment of things, to understand them not in relation to true objects and subjects, the text or score, the genre or the discipline, but from the smell of the earth, and its clammy touch in the primordiality of their existence and ours. In these woods we are not René Descartes ‘thinking things’ but live as ‘thinging things’, that seek not to know the world through the mind but through its body and ours and get to a knowing that is contingent and infinite, moving not towards an ideality but unfolding in innumerable possibilities.[[1]](#endnote--1) - Cymballs and bells, tingling and laughing, around listening, into listening in the underbrush, triggering my re-enactment of his phantasms:

*‘C’est le fantasme qui me donne de l’éspoire’ [[2]](#endnote-0)*

From recording, editing, processing and manipulating sound emerges what could be. Movements of material forming sonic shapes, deforming, reforming, providing brief glances onto their processes to reveal things that otherwise remain hidden. His tracks produce invisible sonic sculptures in time, sonic modulations creating not a two dimensional progression but a spacious materiality: almost tangible, static and moving at the same time. The recognisable is covered in synthetic sounds that question its origin and expand what it might be: connecting, reconnecting, deconnecting oddments in timespace; tinkling, clicking and breathing existence into the unseen. Dhomont’s story produces, to use his lyrics, the private ‘*voyage through the spirit kingdom of the unconscious’* into the awareness of the world in sound.[[3]](#endnote-1)

Framed by the literary enchantment of fairy tales “once upon a time…” we are invited into his work to suspend our perceptual expectations and query our reflective certainty, to find not the true story, a true music or sound art, but to build a contingent truth and music in the invented but sincere world of his sounds.

Dhomot’s composition works as ‘world making predicate’: producing not the hermetic world of music, of the musical oeuvre and its certain discipline, but the fragile and doubtful world of a phenomenological possibilism, private musical life-worlds, full of non-sense, as sensorial sense, that meet others’ in passing moments under the cover of dark, where we see not what we hear but search for moments of coincidence to share a fleeting world of sound and tones that might make music or that might make something else.

It is not music but sound that is the predicate that triggers the production of the sonic world. Music is the instrumentality of sound, it gives it a form and actuality that often belies the formless possibilities of its trigger. It is the gap between the composer and performer, which facilitates and frames this instrumentality and demands virtuosity and a correct interpretation. This gap is the locus of perfection, of ideality and virtuosity to be achieved playing and listening: bridging signification and creating significance. Listening to sound instead closes the gap between composition and interpretation. It proposes a generative practice, an entrainment in and improvisation of the material whose interpretation is not ideal but passing: building music not as an object but from things; and building a musical world not from the positioning of such things vis-à-vis each other, defined by their relationship, but through their compossibility, through their equal difference, that sounds the work as world. This musical world does not differentiate between the ground, the line, the score and the sound, making one the necessity of the other, and the other the explanation of the one, but is both at once, not on a ground but in the groundlessness of a present production that is unfinished and not-finishable, without a middle beginning or end, but formlessly forming what it might be.

Dhomont’s work creates a different sense of the world, a generative sense which does not take its reference from an actual world but presents the actual world for re-imagination: to obliterate rather than augment the notion of a stable singular actuality in the plural ephemerality of an enchanted composition. To re-evaluate from a critical immersivity, an inhabited listening, what a proper music or a proper sound art might be.

To invite music into the universe of sonic possible worlds aims not to disregard traditional musicology but to challenge and augment its methodology and aims - its intellectual analysis and disciplinary boundaries - by considering the possibility for a post-humanist musical discourse that hears the sounds that make the world of the work and inhabits it to find a critical response from within its materiality rather than in relation to its discipline.

For literary theorist Ruth Ronen the usefulness of Possible World theory for the study of literary fiction is that ‘there is no longer an attempt to locate the fictionality of texts in a textual property.’ There is no longer a need to locate musical value in the score, the musical text. ‘More specifically, in the context of explaining the logico-semantic implications of the fictionality of literary worlds possible worlds serve literary theory in a variety of ways.’[[4]](#endnote-2) Chief of which, in relation to music, is the suggestion that possible world theory offers a way of ‘escaping hermeticist claims about the literary text and the intro-systemic tendency of literary studies.’ Instead it opens the work into an interdisciplinary universe of relationships, references and connections to appreciate that there are ‘other ways things could have been.’ [[5]](#endnote-3) - Other ways we could listen and we could understand and communicate the musical work. Free from musical determinations, from its shape and expectations, listening can play with its materiality to invent what music could be, to abandon its name and discipline in favor of its processes and what it is we hear.

The aim is not to produce another history or another definition however, rather, it is to articulate the plurality of present listening that might well have no ontology, no ground to stand on, but that inhabits a critical immersivity and produces a contingent conviction: a virtuosity not of musical composition, interpretation and discourse, but of a physical engagement and commitment, established presently and precariously by listening to its sounds. To inhabit musical possibilities rather than to theorize musical actualities, and to produce an exoteric rather than an esoteric musicology that leads to a shared “musica practica” a participation in the material of music and what it generates, rather than the fulfillment of its rules and expectations.

The term music itself is under consideration. It is with Morton Feldman not musicianship but a certain kind of musicality that we are pursuing here. In *Liner Notes* from 1962, Feldman writes how he was ‘instilled with a sort of vibrant *musicality* rather than musicianship’[[6]](#endnote-4) - with the sensibility rather than the discipline of music. It is such a musical sensibility that releases us from the limitation of hearing within the conventions of music, but reminds us of the rigor of its practice. Thus the musical work can sound all sorts of things without becoming just anything. This is a musicality not delineated by genius, perfection and the right interpretation of a piece of work, which protects a specialism from outside influence and interference. Rather, it is a sensibility that invites outsiders to practice the imperfections of the body on the inexhaustible flow of sound.

***Music of the Spheres* (1938)[[7]](#endnote-5) slide/sound**

Johanna M. Beyer’s composition draws me into its material through an initial roar of sound that unfolds into four voices that come to sound an expanse between themselves as a place made from synthetic rhythms and a triangle. They sound together and alone the fluid space of an ephemeral topography. Measuring their pace against each other and through each other, they take haste and slow down in a musical exchange that goes beyond music and builds a musical world instead. The environment thus built is a timespace topography that involves the listener not only in its space but also in the geography of its time: viscous, expanding and pulling together, giving space and taking time. Time and space built from the same thing of sound and measured not by either but by my inhabiting of their simultaneous unfolding.

*Music of the Spheres* creates an affective geography of rhythms and long lines going against each other and expanding themselves. Accelerating and de-accelerating, exhilarating and calming down. They lose the track of the musical score, the musical line and are drawing a synthetic one instead, to follow when the ground has been lost, when the map falls short and a new exploration discovers a different musical terrain.

Percussive rhythms stretched and stretching, to lose their regular pulse and sound instead a thickening sphere that is not the portray of a landscape and not the geography of the soundscape, but is the invisible depth of music. Invisible music that cannot be deduced from what is there, nor synthesized from different stand points, to create a musical whole, but sounds the possibility of musicality from the depth of sonic materiality that has lost its certain ground and demands a contingent grounding in listening.

Listening I am following her into this invisible depth to hear the mobility of a musical geography not as a map but through my mapping, my walking its sphere: to make a place, a home in its sound. This listening is not a measuring, it does not follow the score nor does it replace the score, instead it builds a score as the contingent mapping of its place made continually from its sounds and all there

She composes a musicality with roots in a sensorial sense rather than in historical significance or the score. The ground of her sound is not the tone of the discipline of music but the possibility of its materiality. Her synthetic sounds compose a material without a source that produces a possible musical world. The scope and sensibility of this groundless musical possible world however is not confined to sounds that have no source, synthesized or digitally generated sounds. Rather it lives as its generative nature and agency in every sound and thus opens all composition, sound artworks and the acoustic environment, to its possibilities.

A musical listening hears the material simultaneity that sounds the possibility of a sensorial sense of the musical work rather than its actuality or significance. It hears not through musical knowledge but via a musical knowing: generating the musical material from its contingent perception and its private connecting, deconnecting and reconnecting rather than via historical trajectories, canons and the theoretical language of its discipline.

*Music of the Spheres* frees musical listening from disciplinary boundaries without abandoning the rigor of practice and reflection. It brings music to the same sphere of sound that is inhabited by sound art and the soundscape, and thus it makes a joint critical framework, a comparative discourse, that walks through works and across works as worlds in a shared sonic universe, possible.

**A Joint Critical Framework**

***Funeral Music for Queen Mary: March and Canzona* (1695) slide/ sound**

Henry Purcell’s composition for the funeral of Queen Mary consists of 3 pieces: the march, the anthem for choir and orchestra *Thou Knowest, Lord* and the canzona. It is not known which pieces were actually played at her funeral but together as they are now they perform a funeral, a celebration of life and death, of this world and of the possibility of another.

The tracks start with a march, a procession that is a performance, whose performers walk and set a rhythm for me to march to: to enter into their rhythm, between beats and purposeful gaps in whose silence the reverberation of the drums illuminates the space that I share with them, making me aware of its architecture, its size and materiality, and making me responsive to whom I share it with. The drumming is a gathering up of all that is present at that moment, building the environment of the work and sounding the work as world. Drums drumming the drums and drumming the space and drumming the drummers; making audible invisible relationships, and opening a room in their rhythm of beats and through the stillness left deliberately and carefully between them, for us all to be brought together in.

These are solipsistic beats, separated from each other to sound not as sequence, as musical purpose, but as slices of sound that potentially run continuously but remain distinct to build a non-consecutive but spatial rhythm that leaves room to hear the opening that opens me. Not to hear the music but to hear a place, even to see a place, a musical place, whose visuality includes me beneath the visible in a sonic invisibility that is the agency and mobility of the work and remains unseen, but whose experience confirms its plurality.

Purcell’s march makes a timespace- rather than a chronological- music, and sets up a frame for complexity that does not play presently but that is enabled as possibility and hints at what could be playing and what could be heard. The stillness framed by the drums produces a place that is inhabited in his other works by complex rhythms and voices but here it makes room for those to be imagined, felt as possibilities of the musical timespace rather than as realizations of the actual musical work. The march leaves room in my auditory imagination to produce from myself what in his *Fantazias* from 1680 he plays out in a complex plurality of voices and rhythms expanding each other. [[8]](#endnote-6) It presents this complexity as the inaudible possibility of the work that reverberates through the gaps of the drums, and unheard, it has an impact on the experience of the piece:on how I connect, reconnect and deconnect what is there into what could be there also.

The gaps and silences build an environment that brings me into the work, into the gaps of its beat, to fulfill temporarily and continually as unfinished renditions, what the work might be in my contingent listening - the present practice of my listening histories, personal references and private anecdotes.

Into this timespace place produced by the rhythm of drumming, English flatt trumpets[[9]](#endnote-7) enter, adding another breath and rhythm on the line of the drums and around it, expanding horizontally the gaps in whose stillness I centred myself. It is in these gaps between each beat that the sorrow of death takes its place in the shape of the trumpets’ sound that expands that space while the drums move on. The trumpets are lamenting the hollow left by the drums. - Her life, our life, the continuum and simultaneity of life and death performed as a timespace procession, a sound walk: walking through and across sonic worlds.

The trumpets do not push me out of the rhythm, but come to sound around me, encircling me and expanding the vertical pulse of a drummed space with a drawn out horizontality. They lengthen the firmness of the steps and produce a conceptual rather than musical counterpoint that lets the work slide in and out of shape to be fluid in the certainty of its beat.

Out of the reverberant stillness produced by the drums the trumpets carve a broader place, a thickness of sound that I respond to fleshly, with my being in the world of the work. Together those two musical actions, drumming and trumpeting, build an affective geography, which I inhabit in listening, living in the tension of their relationship. Their sliding thickness holds its own present memory and produces ours, which is the prophecy of the work then and our present past now.

**slide**

The marching in the carved out hollow of one’s life reminds of **Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s *The Dark Pool* initially from 1995 reinstalled a few times since**, in which I walk in the semi dark, around things piled up on a table and stacked up against the wall, brought in concert and to my consciousness in their togetherness through sound. Some things sound some remain silent, amassed and gathered in a room, as an archive or as a death shrine, dead and alive at the same time, performed by my walking through it, six people at the time. We march and process, our steps marking a beat and other sounds expanding its consequence beyond our own footsteps.

In both works I must walk, perform my steps in the demanding rhythm and the reverberant space created by sound, acknowledging the pathetic that it signifies but that also triggers it: signifying the emotions of its context and triggering the affective geography of my walking as my contingent participation therein. This is an upright walk that hears the primordiality of life and death through the consciousness of a reflective rationality, a posture we retain and strengthen throughout the anthem and into the canzona.

The canzona answers the march by giving the trumpets the first voice, which they take to expand the carved out space beyond the limitations of a vertical structure, formless and inexhaustible. The beat remains but as a private imagination: my own steps, my own walking, while the trumpets expand as a multilayered horizontality that holds the vertical connections without being tied down or counted however. Different temporalities are laid next to and on top of each other to produce time as an expanded contradiction.

The sliding and swaying trumpets are rejoined by drums a little further in, intermittently drumming in an expanded space to sound as reminders of their absence rather than as the necessity of their presence; furthering the polyphonic imagination through the audibility of polyphonic rhythms that remain unarticulated but present nevertheless. Only sporadically do the drums sound through and thereby show the groundless ground of their action: to sound not as a musical pre-requisite but as the sonic possibility of their own absence; as the plurality of what they can be unheard rather than as one actual rendition.

The emphasis, musically and conceptually, is on the horizontal expanse, the stretching of sounds though multiple layers that occasionally meet with vertical beats that do not tie them down but propel them up. As if reversed, the trumpets give a beat and a space to absent drums to conjure them in my auditory imagination into which they enter as the possible reality of their performance.

The canzona is still a lament but one that has taken on its own rhythm, the autonomy of its own sonic world. The lament has turned into a fanfare, a celebratory event built from complex relationships to which we at first remain an audience and become a participant later on.

There is no actual voice, the human voice is missing from the chanson but is taken up in the trumpets as the voice of another world, euphoric and elated to be as itself. However, the canzona is not about transcending this world to reach another but about being simultaneously in another, the music hinting at the closeness of other worlds: For Lewis, in the paradise of possibilia we can bring different worlds close together, make them compossible, accessible to each other without the constraining limits of disciplines, to reach an understanding of their work together rather than separately. It is the closeness of worlds can help us to understand their “truth”, their meaning: ‘It is only by bringing the other worlds into the story that we can say in any concise way what character it takes to make what counterfactuals true.’[[10]](#endnote-8) The paradise of a sonic possibilia allows us to hear a continuum of sound that neglects disciplinary boundaries to sound music, the soundscape and sound art as close worlds.

The march and the canzona, life and death, answer Lewis’ paradise of possibilia, where we walk crossing and across worlds within the same universe of possible worlds to understand them not through their difference but through the simultaneity of a compossible experience. And this compossibility extends into the experience of other works, then and now, music and sound art. They are close to Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s Dark Pool, and resound my walk through Francis Dhomot’s deep dark wood; they make a prophetic space for the silences of John Cage, and vibrate in the musicality rather than the musicianship of Joanna M. Beyer’s Musical Sphere.

Purcell does not make music in the sense of organizing sound within the expectation of tonality but disorganizes and reorganizes what that might by. This is not a piece that starts as music but makes music, unmakes music and remakes music to be as a contingent practice the flight of sliding sounds. It does not remain within a given discipline but composes, people, places and sounds in a present performance that allows them to be in music rather than listening to it. I am a participant, entrained in his sounds, rhythms and stillness, drawn across them through the sliding sounds of the trumpets and engaged in the reflective concepts of his lament.

In this way Purcell creates a musical world that makes audible a sonic environment that includes silence, rhythmic and sonic, within which sits its possibility to sound outside the musical work as a soundscape, as a walk, as a soundtrack. His sonic environment, created between rhythm and sound find contemporary repercussions in work that hovers between sound art and music, performance and video art, across platforms, to produce a procession that takes us along and expands to make a space from its stillness and its laments, in the rhythm of our own steps walking through sound art and music as compossible worlds within a universe of sonic worlds: ***Hearing the Continuum of Sound slide***

1. Descartes meditations to discuss thinking thing and also the more general idea of possibility at the time coming out of the finitiude of the world and the infinity of god. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. (lyric *Forêt profonde) It is the phantasm that gives me hope* [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. (lyric *Forêt profonde)* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Ronen P20 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. ibid P21 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Morton Feldman, collected writings, liner notes p3 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. this piece is a 6 minute interlude from Beyer’s unfinished opera *Status Quo*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. ref. fantazies [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
9. English Flatt Trumpets have a double slide fitted in the second and third yards, which are moved by the left hand. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. ibid. p 22 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)