

Kacper Graczyk

The concept of music in the context
of modern reception

There exist many concepts of the term ‘music’ among contemporary listeners. Such situation is not dependable on listeners’ background. Thus, it does not matter whether they are the university, secondary or primary school graduates, whether they are constantly exposed to music or interested in it (i.e. they read about music, study its history), whether they are active listeners (e.g. they go to concerts) or only passive recipients, who do not pay attention to it. The term ‘music’ has already started to lose its cultural aspect, i.e. it is not translated separately by any culture or inside this culture. It is the result of gradual decrease of communication barriers, mainly through the development of telephone and transport service. For the average listener the problem of defining the word ‘music’ may seem trivial, “after all music is just for listening”. I have noticed, however, many times (when taking part in various discussions or reading certain publications) that we often *talk* about music, not only listen to it. Therefore, one is inclined to believe that the existence of particular notion method is of great importance. When we discuss something we usually seem to prefer some clarity when exchanging viewpoints instead of using ambiguous terminology which carries no meaning. During the discussion every participant needs to establish some mental concepts of what is expressed. Moreover, he or she should refer to the same semantic field as his partner. When such harmony is shattered it may lead, in extreme cases, to stressful situations, to misunderstandings and arguments. In the circles when music as such is often discussed about, the very definition of the term ‘music’ seems to be neglected or treated as marginal. Instead, the main focus is placed on more specialist topics such as methods of interpretation and performer’s technique, on musical impressions and on categorization¹. During the process of categorization, people, consciously or unconsciously, use different terminology, this being ‘music’ also, whose ambiguity and multi-cultural connotations lead to many heated disputes.

Obviously, the problem of definition is connected with music as such though it is not explored by many music theoreticians, philosophers and artists. In contemporary discourse this problem more meaningful, mainly due to the increasing spectrum of various sound phenomena so often categorized as ‘music’. The lack of clear-cut boundaries and multiplicity of possible approaches to the problem may not help the

¹ Understood as the process of attributing certain sound phenomena to certain classes.

listener in choosing the right definition but the very awareness of such variety may lead to the significant decrease of stress amount caused by arguments and debates connected with music.

To take a definite stand on the subject of this essay, I will attempt to find such a definition of the term 'music', which would neither blur its boundaries nor create a notion which would be fossilized, inflexible and inapplicable to modern artistic works. I think that the word 'music' is necessary to describe a specific artistic activity of an individual and that there is no need to use the word 'sound' instead. On the contrary, I am convinced that such distinction is of much help in the process of communication. I think that there is a significant difference between the words 'music' and 'sound' and that our main efforts should be devoted to finding this difference instead of giving up and treating those concepts as equal. I will try to oppose the common belief, which cannot cope with what may be called modern artistic expression. It is a belief in which all the sound phenomena are identified as music. In my opinion, such conviction fulfilled its function when fighting the fossilized system of musical education which was slowly adapting itself to new manifestations of human musicality. It turned out to be successful at that time but it also created a particular problem because it made the musical discourse more complicated. One may ask why such view is analyzed. Certainly, one may say that it emerges owing to the existing chaos in modern music (with the enormous multitude of projects, bands and musical currents etc.), with the lack of both specific canons and idealistic approaches of artists, critics and theoreticians. Irrespective of this, I think that in many cases one should ask himself the most fundamental question. Is music a monopolist in sound area? Is it the only part of art that deserves to be called the art of the sense of hearing? Is it necessary to call 'music' all the sound phenomena absorbed by human beings from their surrounding? Would it not be more appropriate, more functional and easier to introduce new kinds of art, especially when it seems that their objectives and principles are different or opposite to those characteristic of music in its traditional meaning². Personally, I am convinced that one should be careful with such ideas and apply them in moderation and only when it is justified as it may deprive music of

² This applies e.g. to music as it was understood by neoclassicists, the one that is now taught in music schools in Poland etc.

something very important, that is its flair for exploration, and, consequently, may lead to trivializing its message and making music inflexible as art. We should also refer to the principle of Ockham's razor and create only the such number of arts that is really indispensable in discourse. Below I will try to present two examples of disciplines that use sound as their mode of expression but also dissociate themselves from the music tradition. Those examples may turn out to be an interesting attempt to overcome all the difficulties and controversies connected with the modern musical discourse.

First example is the SOUND ART or AUDIO ART. Sound art "it is art that both uses sound as its medium and addresses sound as its subject of concern. In this sense sound is both the subject and object." [Chołoniowski *Glissando* 8 (2006)] In this way it is described by Brandon LaBella, a theoretician and an artist who supports current. "It is a trend which integrates visual art with the sound ones by rejecting or reducing elements traditionally connected with main genres- such as music, theatre, painting and sculpture- in order to seek new sources of sound, designing new instruments, creating spatial installations(..). It an attempt to integrate components coming from various artistic circles, having different esthetic designata and causing connections not existing before (...). Traditional instrument exists only in the audio art circulation, but in a very limited role: as an acoustic object, a prepared sound source, a tool for accomplishment a particular project (...) the sound may come into existence as vibration of any object that is an integral part of the space, a space where artistic activity is carried out to cause absolute equality of its sources [Antosiewicz *Glissando* 8 (2006)]...This art engages itself into a dialogue with space, time and corporeality. What may turn out to be helpful in understanding the essence of sound art is the introduction of couple of examples from this trend. "In 1976 basing on his experience with 'resonating objects' (Bill Fontana) carried out the first out of the whole series of "musical bridges", high-budget conceptual works, in which he "transferred' in real time (with help of radio transmissions) acoustic surrounding from one place to the other. As a result, new complex spaces were created , engaging not only the sense of hearing but also, regarding the important role of place, the sense of sight." [Antosiewicz *Glissando* 8 (2006)]. Another interesting example of such activity are the works of Alvin Lucier. One of his first experiments was creating a work titled" I

am Sitting In a Room”- in which Lucier recites couple of sentences, sentences that, through he process of repeated recording and playing in the same room, lose their original character and create one acoustic mass together with . Sound art is an art, which in modern world develops dynamically and gains the felling of its own identity, making itself independent of formulas associated with traditional music[Antosiewicz *Glissando* 8 (2006)]. Audio art is more often met in art galleries than on concerts. Certainly, audio art is connected with traditional music, to a certain degree it originates from it, but nowadays audio art separated itself from this tradition in such a way that, apart from the sound material that both arts use, it is difficult to find any other shared points. Obviously, the line between music and sound art is not sharp yet and, probably, it will never be. Nevertheless, I think one may catch the difference between those two disciplines, which may help to classify certain phenomena and artistic works in order to make their reception easier for the listener.

Another discipline connected with sound which appeared in last thirty years is NOIZ (“a study of noise”). This “study” detaches itself completely from musical categories (it is not about the noise appearing in the piece of music but about noise as a sound phenomenon only). Noiz in this current is defined in different way; it is not only a category of some kind of sound but also it provides the whole spectrum of our physicality and mentality (which means that we need to shift the stresses and avoid neglecting other physical symptoms connected with listening and feeling the noise) One of the most important theoreticians, practitioners and promoters of the study of Noiz is G.X. Jupitter Larsen. He claims: “Music doesn’t interest me at all. I have nothing against it, but I think that I don’t play the music. I’m rather a purist in the field of Noiz. What I’m doing is not something that you can listen to but something that you feel and experience physically also in the social context. For this reason, people are often not sure how to understand my recordings and performance (...) I do not believe that what I’m doing is music – I mean, I don’t compose anything, I don’t use instruments... I like noise as noise not as music. I don’t think it’s the question of semantics. It’s an important topic in the discourse, which in recent years has been taken to absurd levels. Many people, who listen to my recordings, can’t understand them. Then I say: ‘Don’t worry, treat it only as noise’ and everybody opens, listens and

understands my approach. There are also people who inherited Cage's point of view and never understand when I say that I want to make an extreme and raw noise. They wonder also if my productions are art or not but I don't care about it. I do my job and I leave those issues to historians and critics (...) I treat information as raw material and transform it in such a way as to make it mean something else or look differently.”[Skolimowski *Glissando 7* (2005)] Juppiter and other artistic groups, e.g. Japanese project K2, use similar means and forms of expression such as music or sound art; they record albums, prepare installations, play concerts, do performances; their sound events are somehow composed but their character and sense is absolutely different. New artistic forms using sound (such as noiz and sound art) often go with their programmes outside the boundaries of the sound by giving the other elements of installation, performance or concert the equal status (e.g. visual aspects, setting). It is this aspect of those new arts that may become a valuable hint on how we should define music. Why? Because in music the sound and its relations were always the most important.

At this point I would like to present my own proposal of how to define 'music'. As I suggested above, the most important element of music is sound, because without it there would be no music. I think also that music does not exist only on one level i.e. that we can isolate certain planes where we deal not only with sound but also with the listener and artist relation with this sound. Music introduces and bases on some principles (changing and sometimes even rejected) which allows imitation and introduce additional category which links the creator (composer), the recipient and the performer (of course, in music those boundaries seem to be blurred and the two or even three functions may be represented by one person or the whole group, but still the very functions are clearly detailed. A significant element of music is introducing a category of instrument into it. An instrument in music serves a specific tool; it belongs to the group of things prepared from the three-dimensional space or virtual space (in the case of computer instruments) in the act of performing, creating and composing. It is used usually in a particular way and it only the source of sound. It means that, for example, it is not important how it looks. The instrument is examined in the context of its role in the composition, its character and its sound's associations. Apart from this,

many instruments are objects that are obviously associated with the notion of music (trumpet, piano etc.), and in the unchanged character (without any physical changes) occur in many compositions of performers. There are the permanent elements of some musical genres and the ability to use them plays an important role in evaluation of artistic performances. Another element which is indispensable when defining music is the fact that music has many languages of description, languages that are substantially extended and enable us to reconstruct the same piece in different place and time. This is also another characteristic aspect of music: its ability to distance itself from real place and time, which allows its reproducing and evaluating somewhere else, some other time by absent people who do not often listen to it but only observe its graphic representation (what is difficult or even impossible in the case of sound art and noiz which are more physical disciplines). Works of music are always limited by time and have a specific length and, consequently, a structure. They have their beginning and end, even if they are to last for ages like, for instance, the famous work of Cage.³ Listener (recipient) plays a significant role in the process of defining music. It does, in fact, depend on him whether the given arrangement of sounds will be qualified a music or other artistic field (the author exerts also a great influence by helping the listener to classify the piece of music; he states his attitude toward his work, tries to categorize it under certain labels, traditions e.g. music, sound art, noiz). Nevertheless, these are listeners that, through the discourse about a specific work of art, classify it and place in the tradition of reception. Through the introduction of subjective elements (such as listeners' attitude, author's intentions) and application both the strict criteria (time limit) and those not yet specified (already mentioned in the essay) we get a "fluctuating definition", which together with e.g. sound art or noiz may help to classify certain pieces of art connected with sound, make the critical evaluation easier and, above all, spare the listeners all the stresses cause by the very evaluation and classification.

³ It started to be performed in 2002. At present we can listen to its first sound, which will last for the next 70 years.

References

Klimpel Wiesława, *Style kierunki i twórcy muzyki XX wieku*, Warszawa: COK 1980

Lasocki Józef Karol, *Podstawowe wiadomości z nauki o muzyce* Kraków: PWM 1982

Lissa Zofia, *Zarys nauki o muzyce* Kraków: PWM 1987

Woźna-Stankiewicz Małgorzata, Dobrzańska-Fabiańska Zofia, *Muzykolog wobec dzieła muzycznego Musica Iagellonica* 1999

Antosiewicz Kamil, *Glissando 8* (2006), „Sound Art“

Chołoniewski Marek, *Glissando 8* (2006), „Audio art”

Skolimowski Jacek, *Glissando 7* (2005): „Czuły barbarzyńca”

www.sonic.mdx.ac.uk/research/brandon.html

www.resoundings.org/Pages/Untitled1.html

www.audio.art.pl

1. Why defining music is important and in which situations can it help?
2. Why There are many different definitions of music ?
3. Why we need distinction between sound and music? The meaning of some theoretical positions in which this distinction not appear.
4. Is music a monopolist in sound area? Is it necessary to call 'music' all the sound phenomena absorbed by human beings from their surrounding?
5. The functions of new kinds of art. How can they help in describing music.
6. Sound art (Audio art). What it is? How does it appear ? couple of examples from this trend. The distinction between sound art and music
7. Noiz. What it is? Fragments of discussion about noiz. Differences between noiz and sound art and music.
8. The characteristic of music. Music instrument- description and functions . The meaning of music temporality. Why listener is so important in defining music.
9. My definition of music.