

THE RHETORIC OF NATURE IN NEW-AGE MUSIC

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I. Introduction

Good morning! It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to discuss with you a topic which I've been working on for some time. As I'm approaching it primarily from a Communications point of view, I especially welcome the comments you can provide from your disciplines, so I'm looking forward to your questions. In today's talk I'd like to present the argument that at least some new-age music can be approached as a persuasive discourse which employs recorded natural sounds as part of its strategy and that the resulting musical discourse is troubled by a number of ironies, contradictions, and paradoxes.

Before I proceed to develop these claims, I'd like to clarify my position. Although I have some concerns about the effectiveness and even the underlying ideology expressed by this music, I'm also concerned that my criticisms not be taken too broadly. I'm not hostile to the idea of nature as a musical subject, nor to the practice of recording natural sounds, and I'm certainly not attempting to mount an offensive against newage music in general. My sole interest here is in music which incorporates recordings of natural sounds.

II. Definitions

At this point you may be wondering how I'm defining rhetoric, and some of you are perhaps perplexed that I'm invoking what is commonly understood as an art of deceit and manipulation.

Certainly rhetoric is often referred to in conjunction with words such as "empty" or "misleading", but this attitude fails to recognize the more honourable aspects of rhetorical history.

Classical rhetoric, as opposed to what politicians create and we revile, was certainly concerned with persuasion, but it was also generally regarded as a legitimate, even central subject in the ancient curriculum, a genuine art which citizens required proficiency in if they were to fulfill their duties.

In ancient times, then, rhetoric constituted a body of theory and practice developed to suit the communicative needs of city states in formal public discourse - legal, political, and ceremonial.

However, this in itself is not enough to answer the question you're ready to launch - why is this ancient discipline of persuasive public address relevant to the analysis of modern music?

To answer this question, I need to turn to features of rhetoric which have endowed it with the flexibility and versatility which

largely account for its survival. First, rhetoric is specifically concerned with the logical and emotional dynamics of persuasion - thus Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in any given situation the available means of persuasion". This feature is tied to its stress on three major sources of persuasive appeals which relate to the whole person. Rather than privileging the appeal to logic, rhetoric also acknowledges the appeal to emotion (pathos) and the appeal from the speaker's character (ethos) as significant non-rational influences. Secondly, although rhetoric may seem very text-bound now, it was originally (and is still regarded as such in some Speech departments) an art of performance; the canons, or major headings of rhetorical knowledge, were intended to help the aspiring orator with every step of the process from analysing the audience and discovering the strongest arguments available, to making decisions about style, and the various issues concerning the actual delivery of the speech. Even the process of memorizing the speech was a subject in the rhetorical curriculum.

So, as you can see, rhetoric was a theoretical system of knowledge about persuasive discourse with an obvious practical importance, concerned with the quality of the final product but interested in the process which lead to its generation. In its concern with a balance between theory and practice, its emphasis on both product and process, rhetoric shares some important traits with another ancient techne - music. This shouldn't be surprising. From the beginning, rhetoric was connected with poetics, drama, and music. Plato criticised all three for their ability to lead human souls by non-rational means. More recently, the historian Richard Enos has argued strongly that in its earliest appearances rhetoric was closely linked with the rhapsodic tradition of ancient song and poetry, and that the concern with figures of speech and the emotional impact of style are derived from this common root.

More recent approaches to rhetoric also support its relevance to the analysis of music. In particular, Kenneth Burke claims that where there is any degree of persuasion, rhetoric must be present to some extent. If we are willing to accept that music attempts to engage its listeners' interest and (usually) their emotions, then we can also accept that in Burkean terms it constitutes a discourse. Indeed, the music I'll be discussing resembles a text in several major respects: it is purposive, not random, and expresses a definite address to the listener, which can be called persuasive; it proceeds from a social and political context as well a musical context and these also account for its persuasive power; finally, that force depends on assumptions implicitly held by its audience.

With the connection between rhetoric and music (I hope) reasonably clear, I'd like to unpack the term "rhetoric of nature". By this I'm attempting to refer to the way in which the musical evocation of nature - here specifically the recording of natural sounds - is central to the persuasive power, and thus the

rhetoric, of some new-age music. Our responses to the concept of nature, varied as they may be due to the sounds we experience and our own private connotations, largely constitute our response to the music. In this respect we can view the music as a persuasive discourse which relies on the pathos brought about by the evocation of nature for its power.

III. Three approaches to the Musical Portrayal of Nature

Without attempting to claim a rigorous taxonomy, I'd nonetheless like to point out that there seem to be three major and distinct approaches to the use of recorded natural sounds. The first is to present unaccompanied environmental sounds - actually recorded in nature - such as whale songs, dolphin songs, wolves howling in the Arctic, tropical rainstorms, and the list goes on. The purpose of these recordings is sometimes claimed to be attunement with the natural world, and sometimes relaxation. At their most ambitious, these works are presented as soundscapes for a specific natural region. For an example of this category, you need only turn to page 14 of the Spring 1993 Nature Company catalogue, where you will see advertised "Distant Thunder", "Gentle Ocean" and "Morning Songbirds".

The second approach is to mix natural sounds - typically ocean sounds - with selections from well-known classics. The usual purpose of these recordings is relaxation or meditation; the natural sounds we hear are intended to promote a more relaxed set of body rhythms or a subject for contemplation.

The third, and to me most interesting approach, is to mix recordings of natural sounds with contemporary music - more accurately, mixed with music intended to be mixed with natural sounds - my favourite example of this genre being newage music with loon cries. This music is clearly intended to be taken seriously as music, but some descriptions of it also convey its attempt to represent a specific environment. For example, the Nature Company presents "Sounds of the Bayou", composed by Dennis Hysom, as a "colourful evocation of a natural ecosystem and a human culture".

The selections I'm about to play for you fall clearly within these three categories. The first, "Night in a Southern Swamp", comes from a sampler of Dan Gibson's series of Environmental Sound Experiences. The liner notes describe both the recording approach and the appropriate listening approach: "This series, which is recorded in both digital and stereo sound, presents natural sounds with the most delicate clarity. The result is an atmosphere of tranquillity and relaxation, yet with a sense of adventure. This is not accomplished through storytelling, but from the freedom that these recordings bestow on the memory and imagination of the listener." The second selection, part of the slow movement from Mozart's 21st piano concerto, is contained in New Age of Classics: Mozart from Chacra Artists. Perhaps expecting their listeners to need

less explanation, they simply state: "These ageless masterpieces are recorded with the sound of natural ocean surf". The beauty of this approach is, of course, that almost any classical or baroque music of appropriate tempo can be appropriated for it.

My final selection is "New Age Loon", found in "New Age Loon II", which according to its notes, "brings you the pure wilderness calls of the mysterious loon, artfully blended with soothing New Age compositions." The notes also describe the purpose of this music and the benefits of listening:

"Creatively composed to harmonize the worlds of nature and music, the NorthSound collection is perfect for relaxing, meditating, tranquil daydreaming, or exploring your creative self."

IV. The Context of This Discourse

Now that you've had the opportunity to experience these examples of these three approaches, you may be more sympathetic to my earlier claim that the use of nature in these musical discourses creates some problems. If we are to understand what the source of this trouble or tension is, I believe that we must direct our attention to the cultural and political context of this music so that we can come to grips with why and how it employs natural sounds in the peculiar way it does. Rhetorically, it is important to identify these underlying assumptions which we, as listeners, bring to the music, because these attitudes or shared ideas constitute enthymemes, which according to rhetorical theory are powerful specifically because they do not need to be made explicit by the orator. When the audience find their values and beliefs being stirred without explicit address, they tend to involve themselves in the process of persuasion, and thus intensify it.

Obviously, environmental awareness is one of the major attitudes which forms or informs our response to this music. Proceeding from this is a sense of loss, nostalgia, and vulnerability; it is impossible for us to think about nature without contemplating its peril. In an article titled "The End of Nature" which appeared in *The New Yorker* several years ago, (September 11, 1989) Bill McKibben makes a strong case that although the natural world persists, the concept of 'nature' in the sense of wilderness or nature unaffected by humankind is invalid, that no part of the natural world remains inviolate. Similarly, Ursula Franklin's "Real World of Technology" emphasizes the extent to which we live mediated lives, apart from the natural environment within the "house" of technology. As a further consequence of our awareness we tend to privilege nature and thus its sounds, which are both in themselves natural or iconic and also symbolic of our vanishing nature.

As we embrace the value of nature and commit ourselves to its preservation, we are drawn to oppose all those features of modern life which seem to threaten it. Alienation from and rejection of the major features of post-industrial society are the result. Some of the more important symbols of this earth-threatening way

of life are the city, the ever-increasing urge to commodify and consume, and the drive towards uniformity and standardization.

In opposition to the externally-driven values of science and business, the emphasis we find in the descriptions of this music is on inner reality, and the primacy of the private, rather than the official or public self. Although I don't have time in this presentation to develop the connection, I'm sure that you will notice that this emphasis on internal reality is linked not only with the activities of relaxation and meditation referred to in the liner notes, but with music therapy, and various approaches to achieving wellness through music. Because we experience sound as an internal phenomenon, it powerfully reinforces the internal location of reality, as opposed to the external orientation of the visual.

V. Problems in this Discourse

It may seem both bad-humoured and politically incorrect to want to take issue with a music which seems informed by respect for all the right things and contempt for all the wrong things. However, without disputing the soundness of its fundamental principles, I feel obliged to explain why this musical discourse is flawed. If we approach this music as constituting a discourse, we can identify a number of troubling ironies and internal contradictions which undermine its apparent alignment with the celebration of nature.

One of the most basic issues is the impossibility of adequately representing or capturing nature by means of direct recording. What we hear in such productions as the "Solitudes sampler" or "New Age Loon" is essentially a musical snapshot. While it may indeed be a technically perfect representation of a specific natural sound, there are problems in its representation of a larger entity, let alone nature itself. This music relies essentially on a kind of aural metonymy to assert that the part is entitled to stand for the whole, that it is a kind of acoustic "tranche de vie". My personal stand is that although direct recordings from nature, such as whale 'songs' may be acoustically interesting, attempts to symbolically invoke nature with a soundclip and then mix it into a composition are not very successful. The iconic, direct quality of the natural sound seems to resist attempts to meld it with the essentially symbolic essence of human music.

A more important objection is the ironic involvement of technology in producing and perfecting these sounds of nature. When we read that the recording we are about to enjoy was created with the latest and best in digital recording technology, we may for a moment be comforted by the notion that what we hear will be absolutely faithful to the original sound of nature. But in fact, the great advantage of digital recording is to allow total control in the mastering, and if we eliminate all the pesky noise from our recording of loons, or whales, or whatever, then what

we've created is certainly a product of human judgement and artifice. Ironically, what starts out as a complete and direct representation, cutting through all the old human constructs and deficiencies of technique, becomes just as much a mediated artifact or commodity as what it sought to replace, relying on human skill and judgement for its final shape. However, while earlier music like Vivaldi's Four Seasons only claimed to represent acoustic features of nature in an musically agreeable way, the music we're concerned with is much less honest in claiming to be the thing it represents. The very involvement of technology is hostile to the spirit of the enterprise.

Even more ironic than these two points is the acoustic commodification of nature which these records constitute and engage in. The desire to create a marketable commodity representing Nature seems contrary in spirit to the impulse to privilege the natural and reject the industrial. The marketing of these recordings has perhaps a more dangerous contradiction. On the one hand, we are encouraged as consumers to sit back in the comfort of our home environment and enjoy the digitally-enhanced sounds of nature, specially selected for our listening pleasure - certainly causing no radical break with the industrial way of life! And on the other, the very existance of these recordings seems to make the direct acoustical experience of Nature less important, and its loss less significant. In other words, we are encouraged to expand the range of our consumption without changing our relationship to what we commodify. Taken to its logical extreme, this surely indicates the "End of (Acoustic) Nature".

Author's Note: If you've persisted to this point and would care to comment, please write to me at the Faculty of General Studies, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, or send e-mail to cragg@acs.ucalgary.ca .