

Loudspeaker as Shaman

James Hope

Working with sound since the late-1960s, John Cousins has transitioned from a compositional process for traditional instruments, through electronic music, installation and performance to create a sonic art practice that involves both personal narrative and sounds that echo the material and natural world. While Cousins utilises digital manipulation in his work, he continues to source material from the real, sampling from various objects, environments and contexts. *The Loudspeaker as Shaman*, a project Cousins developed to be facilitated by The Physics Room, centres on the use of the loudspeaker as a ‘shamanistic tool’ that allows him or her to perform certain actions while demonstrating their spiritual attributes. To consider the loudspeaker in this way is to undergo a shift in perception whereby the loudspeaker is an end in itself; something to be revered and not merely a conduit for the reproduction of sound.

Listening to Cousins’ acousmonium, a 24-channel self-constructed instrument, at his home in Saint Albans can initially be somewhat disconcerting. However, it soon becomes an immersive and rewarding experience. Sitting in a chair in the centre of Cousins’ studio, the complete absence of light can provoke feelings of disorientation and mild claustrophobia. It is in this confronting blackness that the loss of any visual cues forces the audience member (the experience is designed for one person at a time) to become a more active listener.

The instrument is contained within the complete darkness, a multi-channel speaker array that encloses the listener within a 360-degree sound environment. The resultant experience is completely foreign to the normally binaural one experienced by the everyday listener. Surround sound is common in settings such as cinema now, but Cousins’ listening space is a unique construction that allows sound to travel in a visceral way. Some works played through the acousmonium are accompanied by a visual component. On the occasion that I visited, the work *Say* (1998) was performed, a video piece featuring rocks, dirt, pebbles and other debris strewn across a membrane that looked to be placed over a speaker bin. The sound of the speaker caused the debris to vibrate with increasing frequency. Combined with the acousmonium’s immersive sound environment, the work was mesmerising in its intensity.

For Cousins, creating sound art is a highly introspective and empirical process. Works are enacted on the proposition that they satisfy an ‘inner requirement’, a non-

volitional, psychological and emotional momentum that is brought to bear on the creation of the work and which is conjured through an active listening experience.

It could be helpful to use the concept of the duende in order to think in a meaningful way about Cousins' compositional process. The duende is derived from the name for a fairy or goblin-like creature in Spanish and Latin-American mythology. The duende could loosely be defined as having 'soul', a heightened state of emotion, expression and authenticity, and is often connected with flamenco dancing. The term was borrowed and developed by the poet Federico García Lorca in a lecture in 1933 'we have seen that the duende loves the edge, the wound and draws close to the place where forms fuse in a yearning beyond visible expression'.¹ The duende is the non-representable human essence that can be manifested through certain art forms. The loudspeaker could be seen then to perform the function of the Shaman that evokes the duende, to coax it from the recesses of consciousness and to let it exert its full emotive power upon the listener. This could theoretically be achieved in an optimal acoustic space such as Cousins' speaker array.

Sound artist and writer Bruce Russell has drawn on the duende concept but with regards to improvisation rather than composition.

For me as an artist, sound is the central activity - which in my case is the attempt to say something from the self itself. Opening the self to allow this expression to emerge is a problematic exercise. The best results come over a loss of control over this process, an opening to something 'other'.²

Russell additionally refers to his instrument of choice, the guitar as a 'totem' echoing the idea of the sound producing object as having a shamanistic quality as referred to by Cousins. This is perhaps what Cousins means when he states that the 'notoriously ambiguous qualities of sound (which can be infuriatingly oblique) can become a powerful tool for embodying the intangible "otherness of the spirit".³ Both methods of creating sonic art (using either improvisational or compositional techniques) create an optimal sonic environment for this 'otherness' to actualise.

As with improvisation to a certain extent, using a speaker array to provide a precise listening experience allows the artist to exercise as much control as is reasonably possible over the way the listener is able to experience the work. There is minimal interference from external sources in a solitary listening environment (however this cannot be said to the same extent for the improvisational experience). This 'pure'

¹ Federico García Lorca, "Theory and Play of the Duende," 1933, cited at <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/LorcaDuende.htm>.

² Bruce Russell, "Concerning the duende-Practical Materialism-lesson three" in *Left Handed Blows-writing on Sound 1995-2009*, (Auckland: Clouds, 2010) 81.

³ John Cousins, in conversation with the author, 15 May 2013.

listening space is rare in the sense that there are barriers (temporal and financial) to creating the ideal environment for the purpose of listening to sound art in day-to-day life.

This enhances the combination of formal composition and experimentalism that places Cousins in an intermediate space where he operates within both, and neither, realms at the same time. As Dougal McKinnon has noted,

John Cousins is an apt exemplar of someone whose practice is both compositional and experimental. The former in that he remains very much concerned with formal matters and highly values the rich history of Western art music; and the latter in that he has experimented with expressive concerns, affective techniques, and grounded his art in existential intimacies.⁴

Experimental works can contain a narrative element in Cousins' sound art, for example *Sleep Exposure (sound document)* (1990). Other works contain a vocal element, but no narrative; the spoken word acting as a vocal 'pillar'⁵ within a non-representational sound piece to allow the listener to situate themselves within the work. The spoken word devices operate concurrently with sound derived from and informed by the material world. According to Cousins, it is a question of 'telling personal stories in a sound world that had some kind of inevitability about its progression'.⁶

This is a feature that can also be seen in Cousins' performative pieces. A work such as *Bowed Peace* (1986) demonstrates this intermingling of the narrative and sound elements to produce a work of profound emotional intensity. In this performance the heartbeat is connected to a device that strikes a bow string. A letter is placed upside down – requiring the body to be contorted in order to read it. This is achieved using a suspension mechanism which requires the full weight of the body to be supported by the arms in order to read the letter. The rate at which the bow string is struck reflects the physical exertion required to read the letter.⁷ It is the travails of the body that produces the sound art, in turn with the emotive content of the letter read aloud that produces an oppressive tension in the work.

Through compositional, experimental, visual and performative works, Cousins attempts to evoke an essential facet of human 'beingness' in the world, using sound as a tool in order to articulate an otherwise indiscernible 'otherness' in memory or childhood experience. Cousins' process addresses the particular conditions of the

⁴ Dougal McKinnon, "After the Great Divide, the LittleGully: miscommunications about sound," in *Erewhon Calling: Experimental Sound in New Zealand*, ed. Bruce Russell, (Auckland: AF/CMR, 2012), 121.

⁵ John Cousins, 15 May 2013.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ <http://www.studio174-nz.com/bowed-peace.html>.

listening experience by controlling the sound environment – the space in which the composer composes and the listener listens are made as similar as possible. If conditions are right then perhaps it becomes possible to apprehend this otherness in the course of a fully immersive sound experience.

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