

Sonic Genealogies

Thomas Ankersmit on Maryanne Amacher

My name is Thomas Ankersmit, I am musician based in Berlin I make a kind of noise music, electroacoustic music, mostly using a Serge modular analog synthesizer. Most of my stuff is based on a kind of creative abuse of the instrument, making feedback and glitches in the signal and things like that. I'm also quite interested in acoustic and psychoacoustic phenomena in sound and in music. So this podcast is about Maryanne Amacher. Maryanne was a was an American composer and artist who was born in 1948 and passed away in 2009. I meet her for the first time at a place called Bard College in upstate New York. I was there with Kevin Drum from Chicago and the Swiss duo Voice Crack. They had a show there and I'd come up with them from the city to to be there. Back then Maryanne and I only met briefly. Her CD "Sound Characters", her first ever CD, had just been released the year before and it made a big impression on me. She's spent a year in the 1980s in Berlin as a guest of the DAD artist residency program and then around 2003 to 2006 she was in Berlin a lot and during that time we would meet up sometimes and go for lunch or I would come to her shows. She had a number of shows in Berlin during those years that made a really big impression on me.

So Maryanne Amacher was one of the experts of sonic architecture I would say. She was very interested in the spatial arrangement of sounds. As I witness it her work took the form of a kind of concert-installations. What I think was kind of extraordinary about her is that, in general, I guess, sound art prioritizes space you could say and music very heavily prioritizes time but her work really manifested itself equally in time as well as in space. So when I say installation-concerts I mean that the music would really spread out in the room sometimes in a very complex way, sometimes it's very complex place. There was a clear beginning and end in a kind of narrative structure to it unlike a lot of sound installation art. These performances she would prepare for them for weeks, literally spending weeks in

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advance before the presentation in the performance space, moving speakers around, changing angles slightly and really painstakingly molding and shaping the music, sculpting the music on-site, on location.

I guess you could say that there's a kind of European approach to sound in space and then the American approach broadly, in a sense that in Europe the focus was on high-tech and high-expense speaker systems like those at the IRCAM or ZKM or the GRM for example... These large stockpiles of literally trucks full of loudspeakers. And then the Americans, like La Monte Young, Alvin Lucier or Phill Niblock... Their approach seems more about letting sounds unfold according to their own rules, according to physics, according to acoustics; sounds unfolding in space in a natural sort of architectural physically-guided way. And Maryanne was different from both these approaches because she was really dedicated to a very careful placement and specific choreography of sounds. She was very much interested not just in what happens and when it happens in music but especially where it happens and how it happens, where a sound exist and how a sound exist rather than simply what sound is it and when does it come. For her the sound-material she was using was really this raw material. The recordings, the sonic information that she had on tapes for example and came from synthesizers, it was just a starting point, the raw material. The real work was in the three-dimensional arrangement thereof. She would refer to her sounds as they existed in space as "sound characters", as a three-dimensional sonic entities, each with their own qualities and ways of behavior and these "sound characters" they would meet each other and would overlap, they would bump into each other and it would mask each other, etc.

Maryanne had a background and training in scored composition for traditional instruments, traditional acoustic instruments, but since the mid-sixties she decided to use electronics exclusively. Mostly it seems because she really wanted to work directly with the sound itself, she really wanted it to be experiential, she wanted to be able to set her instruments and then observe what was happening and change things and notice what she was hearing and then take detailed notes on that so she was very happy to be working directly with electronics, directly with sound itself, so she could experiment and really experience directly as opposed to scoring something and then later on being able to maybe hear it performed by other musicians. In terms of Maryanne's influences, in terms of who was important to her she studied with Stockhausen in the early 60s, while she was in her twenties for a while and later she became a collaborator and friend of John Cage. She really admired both Stockhausen and Cage I think. Cage put the focus on the active listening with pieces like "4' 33'" for example and I think Maryanne really developed this further. For a lot of people Cage's work, especially "4' 33'", is a kind of conceptual dead-end where people go to and they turn around back to more conventional practices. But for Maryanne, unusually, this seems to have been an opening to new meaningful artistic possibilities. So she was really interested in expanding the role of the listener and actually finding new ways of hearing, not just new sounds; new ways of sensing, new ways of experiencing.

One of the aspects of her music and research that she's most well-known for is her use of an acoustic phenomenon called otoacoustic emissions. Otoacoustic emissions are sounds that are produced by the ears of the listener when provoked with certain stimulus. They are real sounds that are made inside all of our ears, not hallucinations or illusions but actual sounds that are born and created inside our inner ears and they feel like that. All of a sudden sound is pouring out of your ears in the way which is very unusual feeling. Maryanne discovered this phenomenon on her own in the 1970s. She referred to them back then as "ear tones" and although she realized that the phenomenon wasn't new and that our ears have always had the capability to do this and that this has always been happening when we listen to music to an extent, this has always been subconscious and we don't we don't notice this. What Maryanne wanted to do was to really bring the capability of our ears to emit sounds of their own. She wanted to make the listener aware, to create a special "counterpoint", I think she said, where you would have a layer of music coming from the speakers for example that was clearly outside of us and then they would have another voice inside of your head. She wrote a really interesting article about this in the 1970s called "Psychoacoustic phenomena in musical composition. Some features of a perceptual geography". And this concept of "perceptual geography" I think is a very useful term to think about her work. She thought about music as a kind of three-dimensional landscape with real perspective where some sounds might be far off at the distance and some sounds might be around us and some sounds would be inside of us. And rather than our ears simply receiving they would actively respond and also produce sounds. So she thought in terms of a kind of acoustic perspective; music as a geography in a sense of a three-dimensional landscape that the listener could explore, where some things were made by ourselves. She said something like "where the performers and the audience meet in the creation of the music", so that the performers or the speakers generate sounds but then our ears respond and start to emit sounds of their own. And this is an extremely unusual and extremely fine special feeling that can be extremely defined. At twenty-six minutes into this podcast we'll have a piece of Maryanne's that demonstrates this phenomenon, the "ear-tones" as she called them. You should play this fairly loud over the speakers, it doesn't work with headphones. And it might help if you're playing it back to move your head slowly, just a little bit from side to side. And the article is available online, it's quite interesting. If you look for Amacher and the words of "perceptual geography" you'll be able to find it on the internet.

Another aspect of sound that Maryanne was quite interested in was "structure-borne" sound. In acoustics "structure-borne" sound means sound that's generated by physical forces and then transmitted through solid materials like footsteps on the floor above you, for example, or the physical vibration of a ship's engine that's transported throughout the shipping and heard everywhere. So she started working with the idea of using real space, physical space (rooms, etc) as extensions of loudspeakers, so she would take loudspeakers and hide them in other places, like in other rooms, behind closed doors, for example. Not just to hide them out of sight but to really alter the sound dramatically and to get rid of this kind of harsh, direct, "boxy" sound, as she referred to as such, out of the speakers and really channel sound through space where it would take on a another shape and another character. So she would spend a lot of time really aiming, very carefully aiming, original speaker-regenerated sound onto the building or into walls to reflect sound from the walls, reflect on from ceilings, etc. She

was trying to basically transmit the speaker sound into solid structures, into the building, and then it would radiate from the building elsewhere back to the listener. It would radiate from physical structure, so that the sound was to that extent coming from the walls, seeping out from the doors or pouring down from the ceiling for example.

In terms of Maryanne's influence on my artistic practice, on my stuff, there's a lot of things that I really admired about her and that were a big inspiration to me. She was just so radical and uncompromising, both as a person as an artist. She was extremely focused she and went very deep. You could really say she was on a kind of lifelong-quest, as opposed to artist who always have a new project every season, new collaborations or that they always have new and always clever ideas one after the other. She went very deep and was very dedicated to maybe just a handful of issues and this is something I admire very much. Another thing that I found was interesting and inspiring I guess is that she was an outsider, she was an independent artist that had no regular access to places like IRCAM or ZKM, for example, and it's the same for me. She kind of worked on the periphery of a lot of fields in a way and she didn't have an academic tenure or a hi-tech studio lab that she worked in, so I tend to think of her stuff as a kind of "guerrilla" specialization in the sense that she was forced to work with relatively modest means, just a handful of good loudspeakers usually, as opposed to this high-tech systems. And it's not that she wanted that to be the case but the fact is that that was the case. To me she was somebody who went far beyond stereo conventions or surround sound conventions, using a relatively low-tech stuff by really focusing on sound itself by dedicating weeks on placing sound and just really focusing on what the sound do, how does it behave in the space, how does it behave when I change something I change something a tiny bit physically. So she build up this really deep body of knowledge. And the term "perceptual geography" that I mentioned before, which is part of the title of that article of hers, that notion of "perceptual-geography" was important to me and still is. The idea of having sound coming out of speakers for example and I think sound that's beyond speakers and then sound that is literally born inside of our heads. The possibility of this very complex interconnected landscape of sonic phenomena being extremely close or far away or somewhere in between and the different relationships that can exist between them... I've been very interested in that. And the concept of the "ear-tones", the reason that I use "ear-tones", certainly that I use them consciously, I got that directly from Maryanne. I know that I had heard otoacoustic emissions sort of accidentally made by myself before I heard Maryanne's work maybe but she was definitely the one who introduced me consciously to the idea.

What is really noteworthy about her work I think it's this balance of this kind of ferociousness and wildness, this really visceral sound-mass but it's also very detailed perceptually. It's very fine. Very subtle things are happening, very unique things are happening, very fine sonic phenomena are occurring, but then there's also just this really wild, uncompromising and really visceral sound-mass. And it's that balance or that contrast that has always appealed to me a lot in Maryanne's work and in the work of a handful of other people. Her stuff was really loud and people ran out in panic from the concert hall sometimes, but without being "macho" or relying on easy tricks to make things sound really big or cavernous or scary or something. It felt to me that the

sense of scale or the sense of overwhelmingness in her music was really articulating the scale of a real place for example. Her stuff truly was very large-scale because she would physically fill the space in a very direct but also very smart and poetic way. Unlike a lot of electronic music, I think her music wasn't so much about conjuring up these virtual or fictional worlds, but much more about finding new possibilities for the present. Her work didn't seem to portray anything else, it just made the here and the now extraordinary. And that's something that I look for as well, this sort of direct concrete relationship to the current space rather than this sort of cinematic thing of considering the concert hall as this non-space and then sucking everybody into these other worlds. Her work seemed to overlap our physical bodies present in this physical space at the moment with these ephemeral sonic-shapes that she would conjure, that she would unleash upon the situation. But they were not sonic phenomena that belonged to a fictional world, they belonged to the here and now.



Maryanne Amacher. *The Wire*, 2009