

The Emergence of Electro-Acoustic Music:  
The Role of Futurism, Fascism, and Dadaism

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## INTRODUCTION

The social upheaval of the first half of the 20th century changed the way life and intellect was perceived. Global industrialization, global communication, and global wars have strained the boundaries of fantasy and reality for billions of human beings, yet the personality characteristics of humans are believed to have changed little, if at all. It is revealing to view the human being as an unchanged entity placed in a new context, full of new perils and new possibilities.

In this paper, the development of electro-acoustic music in light of the Futurist, fascist, and Dadaist movements will be examined. Since the interpretation of music and musical ideas requires an examination of the link between the musician and his audience, it is quite reasonable to consider the effect of external influences on the musician. Like any means of artistic expression, electro-acoustic music has evolved under the influence of tradition, politics, and society.

As with the development of electro-acoustic music itself, the three movements considered here did not develop spontaneously in isolation. However, for the purposes of this examination, the roles of Futurism, fascism, and Dadaism in shaping the emergence of electro-acoustic music are considered in separate sections. The interaction and conflict between these influences is discussed in a concluding essay.

An important caveat is needed to complete this introduction: in electro-acoustic music, the medium and the message it carries are quite distinct. To wit, the technology of electronic music was invented during a time of turbulent change in music composition using conventional media, such as the orchestra or piano. Despite popular assertions to the contrary, the difference between the electronic medium and a particular genre of music can be exposed by considering the “realization” of conventional music via electronic means (viz. “Switched-On Bach”). The simple application of technology to music is not under consideration here; the application of new emotional sources—Futurist, fascist, and Dadaist doctrine—to the creation of electro-acoustic music is the thesis of this paper.

The Futurist movement had its genesis in Italy around 1910. Futurism was committed to a vehement—and violent—rejection of the past and to a rejection of conventional and traditional forces of the present. As a radical movement in the arts, the Futurist goal was to destroy the old, break the confining bonds of style, form, and aesthetics, and “release the creativity of the revolution”.<sup>1</sup>

The crusade was initiated by students, with F. T. Marinetti as the leader and guiding figure. Marinetti's “Futurist Manifesto” (1909) set forth the tenets of what would become the Futurist movement. He called for wholesale destruction of museums, archives, ancient ruins, art treasures, and intellectual philosophy. Foreshadowing other writers, artists, and politicians who would be caught up in the Futurist turmoil, the use of contradiction and irrationalism was encouraged. Radical pronouncements were hurled without concern for calculated arguments or intuitive reason. The Futurist movement exulted in the fact that its members were all under the age of thirty. In fact, should any of them ever reach for ty, their advice was for “younger and more relevant men to throw them into waste paper receptacles like useless manuscripts!”<sup>2</sup>

The Futurists became a full-fledged political movement by about 1915, and their political influence was felt well beyond Italy's frontiers. The audacity and aggressive character of Marinetti, Pratella, Russolo, and other Futurist followers created a turbulent social and political environment that played a significant part in the subsequent onslaught of Benito Mussolini and the Italian Fascists by 1922. Like the

fascists, Futurist doctrine advocated war, revolt, and opposition to the monarchy.<sup>3</sup>

The fascists and Futurists also shared an acclaim for speed and strength, and a fetish for machines and other technology. It is notable that Marinetti and Mussolini were cohorts in political action until various disagreements made them antagonists.

In art, literature, and theater, the Futurists wholly rejected representation.<sup>4</sup> Followers of Futurism routinely indulged in more than one of these artistic disciplines. In poetry, stage, and literature, they frequently avoided punctuation and syntax in an effort to thwart rule-governance and boost free initiative. For example, short dramatic presentations employed climactic visual effects and nonsense verse. Futurists desired a “carnival of fantasy” and a “hatred of intelligence” that would somehow “transform all the human senses.”<sup>5</sup>

In music, the Futurists gave birth to innovations that would remove the restraining force of tradition and redefine the meaning of music for audiences and musicians alike. In 1911, the Futurist follower Pratella published “The Technical Manifesto of Futurist Music”, which states:

“Young musicians, once and for all, will stop being vile imitators of the past that no longer has a reason for existing and imitators of the venal flatterers of the public's base taste.”<sup>6</sup>

Pratella's manifesto and other writings criticize the use of conventional sound sources and musical instruments, condemning this practice as a ridiculous bow to traditional musical tastes and sanctions. The use of unusual sound sources—such as clanging pots and pans, explosions, and aircraft engines—in a “musical” context foretold the abandonment of the standard definitions of Western music. Adoption of musical sound sources from the environment was supplemented by the invention of new sonic instruments: Russolo's “Intonarumori” (1913) created a spectrum of clicks, pops, hisses, and grunts, while his “Psofarmoni” (1926) produced simulations of animal and natural sounds.<sup>7</sup> Many Futurist pieces appeared between 1910 and the mid 1920's, including multi-media extravaganzas of a highly integrated nature.<sup>8</sup>

The role of Futurist experiments in the development of electro-acoustic music is significant. The way in which the Futurist composers merged the sounds of everyday life into musical works would reappear in the discipline of *musique concrète* and the compositions of Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The “found object” concept exploited in *musique concrète* via sound modification and transformation finds its first use in the compositions of Pratella, Russolo, and Marinetti. Further, the notion of the “found object” motive was extended in Marinetti's final Futurist works, five short pieces for radio broadcast between 1930 and 1937, by exercising the dynamic interplay between sound and silence.<sup>9</sup> Later, the strategic use of silence within compositions would become a standard part of the electro-acoustic compositional vocabulary. The American composer John Cage, although primarily a Dadaist exponent, took the Futurist use of silence to its zenith in his non-composition “4'33” (1952): the piece consists entirely of timed periods of silence, with a total “performance” time of four minutes and 33 seconds.<sup>10</sup> Other Futurist influences on the compositional aspects of electro-acoustic music include simultaneity: the use of multiple, independent sonic and/or visual sources in parallel; and, as mentioned previously, *bruitism*: the music of noise, or the noise of music, depending on personal interpretation. Also, the Futurist belief in evoking an acute response to artistic works can be found in the attitude of many pioneering electro-acoustic music composers toward their audience: a strongly—or violently—negative response is always preferable to no response at all.

A further example of Futurist influence on electro-acoustic music comes from their conviction in the importance of machines in the course of human evolution. Machines were seen as a symbol of a new human sensibility, and as a means of liberation from tedious labor that crushed creativity.<sup>11</sup> This eagerness to embrace the products of industrial and technological developments helped justify and legitimize the use of new equipment (such as the phonograph, tape recorder, and new audio electronic apparatus) in a musical context as soon as each new piece of technology became available.

In summary, the Futurist legacy in electro-acoustic music lies mainly in their assertions that the entire process of creative thought could be replaced, rebuilt, and reinterpreted by supplanting the artistic foundations of tradition, convention, and intellect, with the Futurist doctrine of fantasy, turmoil, and instinct.<sup>12,13</sup>

While the artistic and political aspirations of the Futurists did not attain their fruition in widespread popular support, *fascism* succeeded in attracting millions of supporters in Italy, Germany, Japan, and elsewhere prior to World War II. To interpret the popular success of the fascist movement, the characteristics of its ideology need to be examined.

Fascism is a totalitarian system, meaning that the regime in power outlaws any organized opposition groups, and the political structure pervades all areas of society. Fascist doctrine is intensely militarist, imperialist, racist, and nationalist. In general, fascist movements have derived their popular following by encouraging the base instincts common to most human interactions, e.g. fear of outsiders, desire to be “part of the group”, and desire to improve one's status in society—or at least ensure that the status won't slip. Fascism finds its foothold by exploiting the “frustration, resentment, and insecurity” within all social classes.<sup>14</sup>

As an aside, it is important to acknowledge the level of academic disagreement concerning which of the political movements of the 20th century to paint with the fascist brush. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper, the pre-World War II dictatorships of Mussolini in Italy, Hirohito in Japan, and Hitler in Germany will all be considered fascist. The Nazis of Germany will be of primary interest here.

Historically, fascism has been most successful in relatively wealthy and industrialized nations, while communism has thrived in poor and under-developed societies: Germany and Japan were fascist prior to World War II, while the Soviet Union (1917) and China (1949) underwent communist revolutions. Two points concerning this fascist characteristic are significant for the thesis of this paper: first, the militarist and imperialist inclination of fascist regimes requires a state of permanent mobilization for war and second, maintenance and encouragement of the fear of foreign and domestic “enemies” needs extensive communication apparatus and a steady flow of propaganda. War mobilization and communication structure both require considerable industrial skills, industrial resources, and technological sophistication.<sup>15</sup>

Fascist support was found among all social classes, but often for different and conflicting reasons.<sup>16</sup> The lower and middle classes were eager to preserve their status and lifestyle, and fascist policies—particularly in Germany—promised this by keeping other groups at the bottom of the social ladder, e.g. Jews and foreigners. The upper, wealthy classes were happy to support fascist opposition to free labor unions, and often simply found it to be good business to support a government that spent its resources on large military purchases and was popular with a large pool of consumers. Also, the military bureaucracy enjoyed the high prestige and influence attained under fascist rule. In short, the widespread disorientation of the post-World War I era made any attempt to restore nationalist pride, to

restore the “old” lifestyle, and to crush new and disruptive ideas an attractive political movement for a vast number of people.<sup>17</sup>

Art, literature, theatre, and music were all subject to manipulation by the Nazis. The arts have a profound ability to communicate ideas and attitudes about society and the meaning of existence. Fascist doctrine made direct use of the arts as a tool of propaganda and influence. Perhaps most apparent was the role of music in nationalist feelings. This was most obvious in patriotic political songs and in the use of dramatic German music, e.g. Wagner, as a means of stirring up “an exotic and exaggerated Teutonic romantic nationalism”.<sup>18</sup>

In the print medium, fascist doctrine was expressed by tracts and cartoons designed to contain the essential policy message in a simple, powerful manner. The skillful use of techniques now associated with the modern advertising and publicity industries were developed and implemented by Nazi proponents. These techniques included “get on the bandwagon” hints, exploitation of fears, and appeals to self-pride and self-interest. The use of photography and motion pictures played a role in establishing and maintaining Nazism in Germany. Leni Riefenstahl, the director of the films of the Nuremberg Nazi rallies, did much to propel the fascist movement to power by capturing the popular imagination of the German people.<sup>19</sup>

The fascist movement used the works of a number of influential writers, including D'Annunzio, Pound, Lawrence, Marinetti (of Futurist fame), Benn, Celine, Eliot, and Yeats. Other writers actually became active in the fascist movement. In the introduction to his book “Fascism” (1973), Paul M. Hayes explains fascism's appeal to these writers this way:

“Fascism's structured society appealed greatly to those who had lost their balance in the whirl pools of emotion which flooded intellectual activity and creative composition in the early twentieth century. Fascism, wrongly, was believed not only to satisfy basic human urges but also to approach problems from a sharper and more intellectual viewpoint.”<sup>20</sup>

Fascist propagandists were eager to utilize the widespread influence of writers and artists whose works were compatible with or encouraged the fascist movement.

While the fascists exulted in the opportunity to find justification and validation in artistic works, they were even more adamant in their contempt for the disruptive, contradictory, and confrontational use of art by fascist “opponents”. Disruptive art included any means of expression that might encourage creative thinking, new ideas, or critical evaluation of society and fascist motives. The personal nature and introspection inherent in artistic works was feared for its ability to expose the contradictions and inadequacies of fascist policy. Most new ideas in art, literature, and music were repressed in the interest of national unity of purpose. Although some work continued in private on new means of artistic expression, the public display or performance of contemporary art was almost totally restricted in Nazi Germany. As with many scientists and other intellectuals, artists either had to be content with the Nazi pronouncements, or leave the country for sanctuary elsewhere.

The Nazi use of industrial technology in its war machine and communication technology in its propaganda machine had a lasting impact on the world following the fall of the Third Reich. The possibilities of technology as a powerful means of communication had been demonstrated prior to the Nazis, but the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda efforts—and the exploitation of their invention of the original wire recorders—was an awesome display of the new state of the art for transmission of

conceptual information.<sup>21</sup>

Following the conflagration of World War II, the relatively open communication of post-war Europe allowed the rapid exchange of new ideas and new technology. Some observers cite the lifting of Nazi doctrine as a catalyst for rapid adoption of new ideas and new values, i.e., the rebuilding of the war damage in Germany extended beyond bricks and mortar to the structure of society and the mode of artistic expression.<sup>22</sup> For the development of electro-acoustic music, the new, open attitude toward changing ideas may have improved the credibility of practitioners of the new medium. The freedom from the bonds of political oppression under the fascist Nazi regime could only result in a new outlook and a new curiosity among the artistic community, if not among the war-weary population. The onset of the Cold War and the schism between East and West eventually slowed the exchange of new concepts, but the exchange continued nonetheless.

Many Futurist ideas were based on examining and interpreting the reality of the physical environment. The use of “real life” sounds in many Futurist musical compositions and the belief in the fundamental goodness of technology are two examples of their interaction with the world around them. Similarly, fascist doctrine was typically cold, structured, and in a sense pragmatic: the way to a better existence was through domination and conquest. A different approach is found in the philosophy of Dadaism. In Dada, expressionism and interpretation are opposed, as are the concepts of idealism and realism. In particular, the Futurist and fascist tendency for art to imitate life—or an idealized way of life—is reversed by the Dadaists: art should be transformed *into* life.<sup>23</sup>

Dada had its inception in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. The Cabaret Voltaire was a bar where Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Marcel Janco, and Richard Huelsenbeck (the founders of Dada) engaged in a variety show. These men had converged in Switzerland, a neutral country, at the outset of World War I to avoid the disruption and uncertainty that they felt in Germany, France, and elsewhere in Europe. Their goal was to shut out the “autocratic and materialistic” ideas that had led to the war, and “make the Cabaret Voltaire a focal point of the 'newest art'.”<sup>24</sup>

The name 'Dada', meaning a wooden horse or hobby horse, was found by accident in a German-French dictionary.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Futurism and fascism, Dadaism did not become an outspoken political force and lost momentum by about 1920. The movement was characterized by rather obscure principles and a strong aversion to anything appealing to traditional public tastes. The goal was to “give the truth a new impetus” and to be “a rallying point for abstract energies”.<sup>26</sup>

“Truth” was an important concept in Dada. If something had the attribute 'truth', it required no search for hidden meanings, no consideration of context, and no interpretation of any kind. For this reason, the use of realism or expressionism was shunned, and Dadaist artistic works would not be analyzed nor compared. Art was a part of life, and was to be experienced rather than interpreted. Unfortunately for the modern observer, data on performances and published versions of plays, music, and literature are almost non-existent. This may be attributable to the Dadaist's desire to keep their art free of any attempt to cater to traditional public tastes and customs: to do so would betray the artistic motive and substance.<sup>27</sup>

Transformations were used extensively, including sonic changes (baby talk, etc.), chance (random ordering, non-determinism), and simultaneity. The Dadaists were familiar with the Futurist movement, but did not embrace it due to Futurism's basis in “realistic” concepts. However, the Dadaists did borrow the notions of simultaneity and bruitism.<sup>28</sup> Simultaneous reading of different poems and simultaneous

performances of music, noise, poetry, and nonsense speech were presented. Dadaist theatre included mixtures of poetic sequences, music, dancing and gymnastics, etc. In short, the Dadaist definition of art was at least as broad as that of the Futurists.

As with Futurism, the legacy of the Dada movement lies in the breaking of bonds of tradition and the expansion of the definition of art and music. Dada influenced the course of electro-acoustic music by shaping the ideas of many composers, including Darius Milhaud, Edgard Varèse, and John Cage. Certain “Dadaist” traits that appeared in electro-acoustic music may have been direct descendants of the Dadaist movement, or perhaps independent rediscoveries of techniques and concepts. The use of variable-speed phonographs, as in Cage's “Imaginary Landscape #1” (1939), seems to be a technique with Dadaist overtones.<sup>29</sup> While *musique concrète* using phonograph or tape typically involved planning and deterministic execution, the use of indeterminacy in live performances of electro-acoustic works by Cage and others was a direct use of the chance concepts of Dada. The difference between the “planned” score and the events that actually transpired during a performance was, intentionally, unpredictable. For the development of electro-acoustic music, the experimental and innovative use of sound often lay in its indeterminacy and unpredictability.<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This paper has described the characteristics and artistic influences of the Futurist, fascist, and Dadaist movements. Although it is risky to draw impromptu cause-effect relationships in art, it is clear that the emergence of electro-acoustic music as a new medium of expression relied heavily on its artistic and political contemporaries and antecedents. The desire to cut ties with the past and with public tastes was a strong motivator in the Futurist and Dadaist experiments, and this attitude was adopted by many of the composers and musicians working in electro-acoustic music. Other common factors included the desire to produce music where context and style were unimportant, the effort to generalize the concepts of music to include any arrangement of sounds (even environmental noise), and the struggle to unlearn the old, prejudiced ways of hearing and replace them with a broad new vocabulary of music.<sup>31</sup>

The role of technology in shaping the means of electro-acoustic music production is unmistakable. What is less obvious, and more significant, is the role of technology in altering the “absolutes” of society. The dehumanized feelings brought about by global urbanization and industrialization caused the turmoil from which the Futurist and fascist movements arose, and from which the Dadaists tried to escape. In all three movements, a fundamental concern was the need for new attitudes, new coping mechanisms, and new explanations for life and reality in light of the major changes underway in human society. For artists of the pre-World War II years of the 20th century, the new attitude was often one of contempt for the tastes and desires of their audience.

This mood of isolation of the art creator from the art consumer continued into the development of electro-acoustic music, and this has had a great influence on shaping the direction of serious electronic music composition.<sup>33</sup> Isolation has enabled changes to occur at a faster rate than possible in the population at large, and has allowed experimentation without worry for outside reaction. It has also created a distinction between “popular” and “serious” electro-acoustic music that is reminiscent of the Dadaist belief that something pleasing to the public was, of necessity, a lie.

It cannot be known with certainty whether electro-acoustic music would have evolved in the same form without the existence of Futurism, fascism, Dadaism, and other influences. However, a comparison of

the characteristics of electro-acoustic composition—and the stated philosophies of its composers—with the goals, ideas, and innovations of the groups considered in this paper leads to the conclusion that our modern concept of electronic music is indeed indebted to the artistic and political movements of the early part of the 20th century.

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