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THE TWO TRADITIONS OF 'EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC': IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LATER CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

Paper given at Xperimus 2022 Conference, Casa da Musica, Porto, 16 April 2022

Abstract: There are two traditions of musical work which have laid claim to the term 'experimental music'. The first is today perhaps the most familiar, referring to the work of John Cage and other composers associated with the 'New York School', with precedents in the works of Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, and Harry Partch, then feeding into a range of other work in North America, Europe and further afield. Such a tradition refers to a new approach to compositional intention, the use of indeterminacy of various types, and a general rejection of a role for the composer which is said to date back to the European Renaissance. This tradition was given its clearest conceptual definition in Michael Nyman's 1974 book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, which consolidated a quite stark dichotomy between the 'experimental' and the 'avant-garde', which continues to inform a good deal of historiography of twentieth and twenty-first century music. The second derives from Pierre Schaeffers' lecture 'Vers une musique expérimentale' given in Paris in 1953, and refers to music produced in a laboratory or equivalent, especially involving electronics, tape or computers, used in various ways that can be compared to scientific experiments. It was taken up by figures such as Lejaren Hiller, Abraham Antoine Moles, Luigi Rognoni, and others, but also employed in writings of Herbert Eimert, Luciano Berio, Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Henri Pousseur, and continued in continental Europe for several decades.

In this paper, I give a brief outline of these two conceptual histories, and consider how both have fed into more recent use of the terms 'experimental' and 'experimentation' in music. I argue for greater terminological precision where possible, looking somewhat sceptically at some recent writings which have used such terms rather loosely, and also examine how they are embedded in concepts of practice-as-research and Artistic Research. In conclusion, I ask where the *boundaries* might lie concerning musical experimentation, which types of music might *not* be considered 'experimental', in order that the term is not so broad as to lose all meaning.

The terms 'experimental', 'experimentation' and 'experimental music' are somewhat ubiquitous in both academic and artistic circles today, as the very theme of this conference suggests! Yet they have in earlier times received relatively specific meanings which have fed into contemporary concepts. In this paper I wish to trace briefly some of the history of the concepts and consider both some of the aesthetic and academic values contained therein, as well as the question of how we might best employ and/or modify them today.

Three writers in particular have explored the emergence and development of the term 'experimental' in a musical context: Heinz-Klaus Metzger in 1985; Christoph von Blumröder in 1995; and William Brooks in 2012.¹ [Include references on slide]. Von

¹ Heinz-Klaus Metzger, 'Zum Begriff des Experimentellen in der Musik', *Zeitschrift für Experimentelle Musik*, No. 2 (March 1985), pp. 29-48; reprinted in Metzger, *Die freigelassene Musik. Schriften zu John Cage* (Vienna: Klever Verlag, 2012), pp. 91-105; Christoph von Blumröder, 'Experiment, experimentelle Musik', in Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht (ed.), *Terminologie der Musik im*

Blumröder and Brooks find some early antecedents in the nineteenth century, in writings Wagner, Hanslick, August Reißmann or Theodore Thomas, commonly to refer to new types of composition, new repertoire, or new forms of audience reception. But it was in the early twentieth century that the term began to be used somewhat more specifically. Metzger notes how German critics used Schoenberg's use of a bowed cymbal in the Five Orchestral Pieces, op. 16 (1909) *experimentell*, whilst the exploration of microtones by Julián Carrillo, Ivan Wyschnegradsky and Alois Hába were also referred to as *Experimente*, and microtonal pianos, clarinets, harmoniums and harps as *experimentelle Musikinstrumente*, while Brooks has traced similar usages in American publications from 1924 onwards. Schoenberg himself said of 'experiments' in his *Harmonielehre* (1911) that they 'would reduce beauty to an arithmetical problem', Busoni spoke of the necessity of 'a long and careful series of experiments' in order to render microtones 'approachable and plastic for the coming generation, and for Art', while Charles Ives wrote in 1925 of his father 'experimenting with glasses and bells'.

The First Tradition

If this conception could encompass certain types of innovative work on both sides of the Atlantic, a related conception was being developed by Cage himself from the late 1930s, which constitutes what I call the first tradition of 'experimental music'. Several early events are significant:

- Cage using the term 'Experimental Music' in 1939 for a course in Seattle for composers 'advanced work in new materials',² around the same time as Edgard Varèse spoke of how 'The very basis of creative work is experimentation – bold experimentation'.
- Cage's text 'The Future of Music: Credo' (1940) in which he said that 'centers of experimental music must be established', involving 'new materials, oscillators, turntables, generators, means for amplifying small sounds, film phonographs, etc.', with which composers would work and where there would be performances and development of sound for theatre, dance, radio and film.
- Photographer and leading Bauhaus figure László Moholy-Nagy inviting Cage in 1941 to form a Center for Experimental Music at the faculty of the School of Design in Chicago. The financial bids were however unsuccessful.
- Cage delineating an experimental provenance for the work he wished to pursue, in a letter to Peter Yates in December 1940, including work of Russolo, Varèse, Stravinsky, Milhaud, Bartók and Chavez's use of percussion, Ernst Toch's *Fuge as der Geographie*, Toch, Antheil and Hindemith's works for player-piano, electrical instruments, and use of radio and film to produce sound effects.

Cage's thought in this direction would develop further in the 1940s as a result of his increasing interest in Satie and then in Asian philosophy. Then, following a period in Europe from March to October 1949, Cage at first aligned himself with what he

20. *Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1995): 118-140; William Brooks, 'In re: 'Experimental Music'' *Contemporary Music Review* 31/1 (2012), pp. 37-62.

² Leta E. Miller, 'Cultural Intersections: John Cage in Seattle (1938-1940)', in David W. Patterson (ed.), *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 62; also cited in Brooks 'In re: 'Experimental Music''': 45.

would later characterise as the European avant-garde (in contrast to inter-war modernists), but started to conceptualise a stronger American/European divide. The latter became strengthened in his mind during the course of multiple trips to Europe in the 1950s, where he, mostly with Tudor, came into wider contact with radical European figures. These encounters appear to have stimulated his key writings 'Experimental Music: Doctrine' (1955); 'Experimental Music' (1957); and 'History of Experimental Music in the United States' (1959), the latter of which was first published in a translation by Heinz-Klaus Metzger in the *Darmstädter Beiträge zur neuen Musik* of 1959.

1955: Cage argues that the 'experimental' should not be judged 'in terms of success and failure', but instead 'as of an act the outcome of which is unknown', with experimental actions 'generated by a mind as empty as it was before it became one'

1957: (written as an address to a convention of US music teachers). Cage says that the 'experimental' is now used 'to describe all the music that especially interests me and to which I am devoted, whether someone else wrote it or I myself did', not distinguishing American/Europe developments.

[1957: Boulez's lecture 'Alèa', delivered at Darmstadt by Metzger, critiquing the use of chance in particular.

1958: Christian Wolff (in 'Immobility in Motion'), made a clear distinction between the alleged historical self-consciousness, and 'constructive and methodical bias' of Boulez and Stockhausen and the 'greater freedom and intransigence' of Cage, Feldman, Brown and others.

1958: Cage and Tudor at Darmstadt. Pousseur compares their work to a Dadaist manifesto. Cage lectures on 'Indeterminacy' and 'Communication']

1959: Cage makes clearest distinction between himself, Brown, Feldman and Wolff, and Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono, Maderna, Pousseur, Berio. Former group more concerned with sounds as self-contained entities, rather than their interrelationships. Also believes that the US is the most hospitable climate for radical experimentation.

Same year sees important relevant essays by Stockhausen ('Musik und Graphik'), Nono ('Geschichte und Gegenwart in der Musik heute') and Metzger ('John Cage, oder die freigelassene Musik').

Cage's reputation and influence in Europe grew following his 1958 Darmstadt visit, but during the 1960s there was relatively little development of his own concept of 'experimental music'. One exception is the essay by Peter Yates, 'The American Experimental Tradition' (1960), in which he used the term in a manner close to Cage. He focused on new tuning systems from Partch and Harrison, Ives' use of vernacular melodies, and Varèse's *Deserts*, as well as Cage. However, this does not appear to have been published until 1990, though it did inform Yates' history of twentieth-century music published in 1967.

The next significant step in this conceptual history came in Britain, emerging from the growth of something like a British 'experimental' scene centred around Cornelius Cardew and the Scratch Orchestra, and a series of publications called the *Experimental Music Catalogue* from around 1970. This is the context for Michael Nyman's 1974 book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, one of a series on the 'Experimental' in different art forms. Taking his cue from Cage, but going even further (but anticipated somewhat in Enrico Fubini's 1971 essay 'Indeterminazione e

struttura nell'avanguardia musicale'), Nyman makes a stark differentiation between an essentially Anglo-American 'experimentalism', said to break with the whole history of European music since the Renaissance, and the European avant garde, using such language as 'Once a European art musician, always a European art musician' for Stockhausen.

A handful of less significant English-language essays in the late 1970s essentially continued this view. Then in 1985, David Nicholls completed a PhD dissertation which would form the basis for his book *American Experimental Music 1894-1940*, published in 1990, categorising earlier twentieth-century composers Ives, Charles Segger, Carl Ruggles, Ruth Crawford, Cowell and early Cage (with Varèse, Dane Rudhyar, Antheil, Partch, Conlon Nancarrow, Henry Brand and Harrison as fellow travellers). This established more firmly the idea of the 'experimental' being a century-long American phenomenon, a view also found by anthropologist Catherine M. Cameron in her 1996 book *Dialectics in the Arts: The Rise of Experimentalism in American Music*, based on a 1982 dissertation. Cameron's study is limited in terms of musical and aesthetic understanding, being based essentially on the pronouncements of other Anglophone commentators, but did go further than most in exploring the *nationalistic* basis of this concept of experimentalism.

There were also attempts to delineate specifically British and Australian experimental music traditions, linked to that in the US, but time does not permit consideration of these here.

The Second Tradition

In 1953, Pierre Schaeffer gave a talk called 'Vers une musique expérimentale' for a conference in Paris, at which participants included Boulez, Abraham Antoine Moles, Herbert Eimert, Vladimir Ussachevsky, Antoine Goléa, and Boris de Schloezer, and at which works of Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, Boulez, Messiaen, Michel Philippot and André Hodeir were played. Schaeffer's paper was published in 1957 in *La revue musicale*. Boulez also gave a paper at the conference with the same title in which he discussed briefly Cage's use of the prepared piano, and also originally included two handwritten musical examples from the *Music of Changes*. He employed the term to refer to music produced in a laboratory, thus especially that involved electronics, tape, or computers, as soon afterwards did Moles and Lejaren Hiller, as well as the writer Luigi Rognoni.³ Various events and congresses were organised around this theme, while Hiller founded the Experimental Music Studio at the University of Illinois in 1958, the first formally acknowledged electro-acoustic facility in the United States, though this would become the site where the different definitions would exist in conjunction.

Metzger recalled the term *experimentelle* used in the 1950s to refer to both *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik*, while Konrad Boehmer recalls it being used by German critics to differentiate the post-war avant garde from interwar modernism. Many other examples of these types of definitions have been found from the 1950s up to the 1970s, including in writings of Eimert, Boulez, Berio, Nono, Stockhausen and

³ Luigi Rognoni, *Fenomenologia della Musica Radicale* (Bari: Editori Laterz, 1966), p. 60, cited in Joaquim Benitez, 'Avant-Garde or Experimental? Classifying Contemporary Music', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 9, no. 1 (1978): 63.

Pousseur, especially in a 1959 issue of *Revue Belge de Musicologie* entitled 'Musique expérimentale' edited by Célestin Deliège and others. This tradition remained current in a 1970 volume, *Experimentelle Musik*, edited by Fritz Winckel, and in Claude Rostand's dictionary of contemporary music in the same year.

These definitions should not be dismissed as mere historical archaisms. Moles in particular was careful to give a clear position to the work of Cage and others in his formulation, both because of his early exploration of percussion music and also employment of the *I Ching*. What is not inherent in these definitions, however, is a clear opposition between *experimental* and *avant-garde*, which is the dichotomy which emerges from Cage's writings, and reflects the increasing transatlantic bifurcation between radical composers through the course of the 1950s.

The types of oppositions set up by Cage and later developed by Nyman did however progressively inform a good deal of the historiography of new music in English and German, from the 1960s onwards, viewing American and European traditions as essentially antagonistic, though French historians tended to be more inclined towards focusing the concept of 'indeterminacy' around European 'aleatoric' music, and noting its provenance in the likes of Mallarmé, Joyce, René Char and others.

Some more meta-critical work

A key essay ushering in some new critical perspectives on the concept was Frank X. Mauceri, in his 1997 essay 'From Experimental Music to Musical Experiment'. Mauceri noted how the term was already often ill-defined in its employment, but explored a little more critically than hitherto the American/European opposition contained especially within the Nyman definition, linking it to attempts to construct American cultural authority, and the differences in the conditions under which European and American contemporary musicians operate, especially in terms of state support and institutionalisation. Björn Heile, in his 'Darmstadt as Other' (2004), went further in criticising the exclusion of key European composers by Nyman, but did not really pursue the possibility that this view really came out of the New York School composers. Christopher Fox, in a range of articles, came to reject the avant-garde/experimental opposition, but replaced with that of modernism/postmodernism, in a way which is not really any less problematic. M.J. Grant, in 'Experimental Music Semiotics' (2003), casts the 'experimental' net beyond the Anglophone world, and draws upon the semiotic theories of C.S. Peirce to distinguish experimental *presentation* from other types of musical *representation*, as well as linking experimentalism to a self-awareness about the nature of musical processes, as found in the work of Dieter Schnebel, for example.

Then Stephen Chase, in his PhD dissertation 'Improvised Experimental Music and the Construction of a Collaborative Aesthetic' (2006) and George Lewis, in *A Power Stronger than Itself: the AACM and American Experimental Music* (2008) also cast the net wider. Chase gives a greater emphasis on improvised music within such a tradition, Lewis to jazz and African-American traditions, noting the extent to which the 'experimental' tradition is almost exclusively populated by white musicians. While both writers work is very interesting, their employment of the term 'experimental' becomes more and more amorphous. Similarly, in his *Experimentalism*

Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits (2011), Benjamin Piekut recognises the problems with the concept and its lack of definition at the hands of various writers, but still continues to use the same groupings and exclusive American focus. Like Cameron before him, Piekut's view is limited by its excessive reliance upon musicians' own pronouncements rather than independent evaluation of the nature of their work. In a disappointing book laying claim to the Nyman tradition but demonstrating little of its conceptual sharpness, *Experimental Music since 1970* (2016), Jennie Gottschalk devotes a chapter at the outset to 'Defining Features of Experimental Music' and delineates five major features: indeterminacy, change, experience, research, and non-subjectivity. However, because of the reasonable qualification that such music need not exhibit all of these qualities, she is left in a situation where almost all music after 1970 which is not blatantly neo-tonal or neo-romantic could thus be categorised as 'experimental', and the wildly varied list surveyed lacks any particular unity that would not equally be shared with other music.

Experimentation and Artistic Research

As I hardly need to explain to anyone here, the term 'experimentation' also gained new currency through the development of Artistic Research in music, especially through the work of the Orpheus Institute from the 2000s onwards. In one key publication, *Artistic Experimentation in Music: An Anthology* (2014), edited by Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore, 'experimentation' is seen by many contributors as a sub-section of artistic research. Both editors are explicit about distinguishing *experimentation* from *experimental music*, but Gilmore still feels the need to re-examine definitions, noting with some scepticism claims of commonality between heterogeneous composers commonly labelled 'experimental', and asking for example why the work of Ives should be considered more 'experimental' than that of Stravinsky. He outlines five definitions, two which come from Cage's 1959 essay, another from Nyman, another to do with a tradition of composition as research, another more sociologically focused, drawing upon the work of Howard Becker. The second of the Cageian definitions relates to the unpredictability of outcome in composition, but it is unclear (as it was in Cage) whether this occurs during composition or performance – if the former, it could equally be applied to systematic composition of Stockhausen, Ferneyhough or others.

Overall, this body of work relates more strongly to the Schaefferian conception of the experimental than that of Cage and Nyman. Various contributors here also draw upon Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's theories of *experimental systems*, the smallest units of empirical research, designed 'to give unknown answers to questions that the experimenters themselves are not yet able to ask'; *technical objects*, fixed and accessible objects, sometimes the results of previous experimentation, which condition and limit experimental systems; and the results of the systems, *epistemic things*.

Through various models too detailed to examine in the time here, various contributors map these ideas in different ways onto various types of practice-as-research and artistic research, though there is not really a consensus about what exactly constitutes 'experimentation'. Some treat artistic research and experimentation as almost interchangeable terms, some think more familiar artistic practice can be considered as experimentation, others reject this strongly, while the likes of Godfried-Willem Raes

probably comes closest to the Schaefferian model, drawing upon older scientific models which clearly separate art and research.

More loosely, the concept of experimentation has informed the discourse on *practice-research* in the Anglophone world, distinct from artistic research, and far more dominated by composers (while artistic research features a majority of performers, and not only those working on new music).

Both the work of Chase/Lewis/Piekut/Gottschalk on one hand, and the re-development of the concept of ‘experimentation’ in relation to practice-research and artistic research lead to very mellifluous uses of the concept (in contrast to the use by Nyman in particular). So I have to ask the question, to which I do not yet have a definitive answer, of which forms of musical practice should *not* be considered ‘experimental’? If one accepts that Cage/Nyman definitions, certainly these would include a fair amount of European new music, even if one does incorporate the likes of Bussotti, Helms, Kagel, Schnebel and others. But this definition is not really sufficient to characterise a lot of the work encompassed by this conference and in the wider recent literature on the subject.

If framing work as an ‘experiment’ is a necessary if not sufficient condition for considering some work as artistic research or practice-research, then some further limits warrant consideration. I take a different view from some in believing that to consider practice as research does not necessarily require a written component, and also, in distinction to what Paolo de Assis was saying yesterday, that various compositional work from earlier times warrant being considered as research as much as those which have developed after the conceptual vocabulary had been developed to describe them. The question of ‘is it research?’ with respect to various species of practice is one I find rather banal – the vast majority of practice entails many choices and decisions which respond to what I think should be considered akin to other types of ‘research questions’. Instead, I believe the real question is that of the *quality* of the research, and the extent to which it can thus be considered to have achieved some parity with other forms of research.

As such, what we might consider the ‘gigging’ or session musician, one who has a reasonably fixed set of stylistic and technical practices which they apply to whichever work comes along, without necessarily engaging in regular critical self-reflection thereupon, can strictly be speaking be considered a researcher (as they had to answer some performance questions at some point in their career), but hardly one regularly engaged in such a thing. Their performances are not really ‘experiments’; rather they sustain their careers on the basis of perceived reliability and consistency of what they produce. There are of course a whole spectrum of different positions between this and that of the iconoclastic ‘experimental’ performer, whose work might radically vary in nature from event to event.

With composers one could draw a similar spectrum between radical iconoclasts, especially those whose style and other parameters vary considerably between pieces, and those continuously generating new work but in a relatively integrative fashion, without major shifts of idiom. It would be deeply unfair to characterise the latter category – in which I might include at least large sections of the output of Bach, Mozart and Brahms – as somehow lesser as a result, or even derivative.

Yet my worry about the lionisation of the term ‘experimental’, and its over-broad application, also linked strongly to the possibilities for certain types of musicians to be more able to secure research-active employment in academic institutions, is the generation of an artificial aesthetic economy, privileging certain ideals of radicalism - especially those involving new technology or new instruments and techniques - and marginalising those taking the more integrative approaches I mention. Amongst performers employed in full research capacities in universities, the majority of whom I am aware are either involved in performance of new music, or historically-informed performance – with a small few engaged with particular reconfigurations of more traditional repertoire, sometimes in the form of unusual outputs on DVD-ROMs, websites and so on. There is very little place for those performing more mainstream classical music, much jazz, or popular music – which creates real problems in terms of the concomitant disjunction created between the expertise of faculty members and the regular interests of students. A few involved in the wilder shores of free jazz or improvisation can become academics, but I believe this work belongs more in the category of new music.

The enduring value of a lot of ‘experimental’ work in terms of the more recent definitions has yet to be gauged – I do suspect a fair amount will come to be seen as entailing primarily short-term novelty, rather than anything of more lasting impact. This may not be surprising and could be an inevitable aspect of many types of research. But I am less convinced that those taking other approaches, who may stand just as high a chance of having a long-term impact, should be marginalised in the way I believe they are.

So with this in mind, I propose the *decentring* of the concept of ‘experimentation’ both in academia and some artistic institutions. It should be considered as one of various attitudes and approaches, rather than given a superior status as a general rule. The types of conceptions of practice-as-research provided in particular by the Research Excellence Framework in the UK do I believe allow for broader conceptions than those founded upon ‘experimentation’, but I am less sure that internal selection panels in universities, or even some REF examiners, truly take these on board. Whilst a defender of practice-as-research in particular, about which I wrote a quite often-cited essay in 2015, I have come round to the view – which I am expressing publicly here for the first time - that practical work needs a separate assessment exercise. In the UK, this might be a ‘Practice Excellence Framework’, in which narrower conceptions of practice-research are set alongside other possible aesthetic criteria. The focus of certain institutions or departments upon artistic research or other manifestations should not necessarily be diluted, but balanced with acceptance and embracing of other approaches within academia, taking into account the relationship between academics’ practice and the desires and needs of students through their teaching. Above all, we should be wary of attempts to limit the scope of practice in academia to that which serves a very particular aesthetic agenda.