

Anticommunication in Herbert Brün's Language of Resistance

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"Nothing is lost sooner than new ways and new languages, and the privilege to walk the new path and to utter the new tongue is given to us but for a moment." – Herbert Brün (2004, 46)

Abstract

For nearly four decades the German-born composer Herbert Brün (1918-2000) employed radical approaches to compositional praxis and pedagogy, inspired by the thought and writings of Theodor Adorno. Brün argued for the purposeful recognition of the social and political significance of composition, and against the tendencies of language to preempt thought. Extending Adorno's arguments in favor of subjective, politicized composition, Brün developed the notion of anticommunication, "a relation between persons and things which emerges and is maintained through messages requiring and permitting not yet available encoding and decoding systems or mechanisms." Grounded in information theory and second-order cybernetics, Brün's understanding of musical meaning attempts to provisionally oppose the commodification and reification of musical signs. This paper shows how Brün employed anticommunication in several of his electroacoustic compositions. The sense of bewilderment or alienation in his work, however temporary, served to probe his ideas about freedom and understanding.

Keywords: Composition, Anticommunication, Cybernetics.

Introduction

Born in Berlin in 1918, Herbert Brün's earliest professional musical experience consisted of accompanying silent movies at the piano. Shortly after the Nazi's assumed power he left Germany and went to Israel, where he studied composition with Stefan Wolpe, a former student of Anton Webern. In 1948 Leonard Bernstein brought Brün to Tanglewood to further his studies. From the mid-1950's until he finally settled in Illinois he worked at the now well-known electronic music studios in Paris, Cologne, and Munich, producing some of the earliest examples of non-serial electroacoustic music. He also gave lectures throughout Europe and the U.S.A on the function of music in society during this period. In 1956 Lejaren Hiller and Leonard Isaacson composed the *Illiac Suite* for string quartet at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This work was the very first computer-assisted composition. It effectively established the University of Illinois as a major center for electronic and computer music. Shortly thereafter Brün accepted an invitation from Hiller to come and teach at the University of Illinois. Brün entered a composition environment that thrived on collaboration with other disciplines including: electrical engineering, cybernetics, and cognitive theory. Brün co-taught courses with Heinz von Foerster (1911-2002) on cybernetics, composition, cognition, and social change. Their friendship lasted until Brün's death in 2000. Von Foerster helped to establish the field of cybernetics, and most importantly developed the notion of a second-order cybernetics, which focused on self-referential systems and behaviors. This resonated with Brün's ideas about meaning and perception, as did Von Foerster's slogan that, "The world, as we perceive it, is our own invention." After taking over Hiller's Seminar for Experimental Music in the late 1960's Brün began to implement some of his most radical, cybernetics-inspired, formulations about music and language. Now, with the recently published *Major Writings of Herbert Brün* by Wesleyan

University Press, the opportunity arises for a re-assessment of his many contributions, as a composer and teacher, to the world of contemporary music. Brün's understanding of musical meaning was grounded in information theory, cybernetics, and dispersionist (i.e. poststructuralist) philosophy. The primary function of his compositional praxis was to uncover possibilities for new significance, while opposing the reification of meaning inherent in recognition and appropriation. This paper explores how he attempted anticommunication in several of his electroacoustic compositions in order to, as he often said, retard the decay of information¹.

Anticommunication

Anticommunication, as described in several of Brün's lectures and texts, was an important concept in his arsenal of ideas. In fact it was a thread that informed most of his artistic output. Essentially it involves the slowing of the natural decay of information, which occurs when the infinite process of meaning assignment, or semiosis, comes to a standstill. Cultural signs, like three identical balls in a cup of liquid that eventually become triangular, tend to appear universally connected to their objects, when the decay of information is left unchecked. Thus, the tonal system is mistaken for something natural, or three augmented triads descending by a semitone are heard as "gloomy" or "depressing." According to Brün all musical materials, gestures, and forms inevitably lose what might be called their free-floating signification potential whenever listeners, composers, and/or performers *fail* to anticommunicate. This is no small matter in Brün's world because he sees this as a move from playfulness toward violence. He held that the "insistence on communication ultimately leads to social and physical violence... Anticommunication ultimately leads to the insistence on composition and peace" (1986, 48). The prefix 'anti' is taken to mean juxtaposed, or from the other side, not to indicate hostility or the quality of being against.

In an essay entitled "For Anticommunication" Brün succinctly, yet definitively, describes the concept. "Anticommunication is an attempt at saying something, not a refusal to say it. Communication is achievable by learning from language how to say something. Anticommunication is an attempt at respectfully teaching language to say it. It is not to be confused with either noncommunication, where no communication is intended, or with lack of communication, where a message is ignored, has gone astray, or simply not understood. Anticommunication is most easily observed, and often can have an almost entertaining quality, if well-known fragments of a linguistic system are composed into a contextual environment in which they try but fail to mean what they always had meant" (2004, 63). It also takes place when composers employ what he called "gesture-inhibiting materials" (*ibid.*), whereby standard gestures of expression, for example, are destabilized to the point where they no longer apply.

Brün used the word communication to speak about relations between people and things that are facilitated through already available channels. For Brün, communication speeds the decay of information in a system, whereas anticommunication retards or delays the decay because of its required use of systems or mechanisms not yet available. Restated within a semiotic frame – communication encourages the objects of signs to couple, while anticommunication attempts to discourage this coupling, if only for a brief amount of time. The gap opened by this delay contains, for Brün, possibilities for non-trivial, non-status quo connections to occur, alternatives to the convenience of recognition.

The concept of anticommunication is of course not unique to Brün. Examples of similar approaches can be found in Futurist and Dadaist manifestos, Adorno's writings, and most importantly in an essay entitled, "To Understand Music" by Stefan Wolpe. Written in 1953, this essay dates from the period shortly after Brün completed his studies with Wolpe, and presents a summation of Wolpe's thoughts on the subject to date. It seems plausible to assume that some of these ideas entered into his conversations with his student. What distinguishes Brün's concepts of musical meaning and understanding from Wolpe's is that he incorporated them within an overall framework that sought to radically redefine the thinking and speaking about music, in order to solicit new compositional constructs. One way to achieve this is by consciously thwarting expectation, an ethical imperative in Brün's world. For example he equated fuzzy thinking with ill-defined music and unintended consequences, which ultimately reflect either irresponsibly naïve or reactionary politics. In taking this ethical stance he shares Adorno's negative posturing, but does not place blame solely upon the products of mass culture. Indeed, the issue is much broader, and cuts across genres, styles, and schools.

Futility 1964

Brün initially formulated the concept of anticommunication in 1961, during a lecture given at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music in which he used the sentence: "a language gained is a language lost!" After a short while the sentence as he put it, grew old in his mind (2004, 61). "Its original informative impact, when it still had raised questions, controversy, and curiosity... was irresistibly drowned by repetition" as he thought more about it. "It became a kind of slogan and began to take on features of a thing one can say – a thing one thinks one understands because one has *heard* it before and not because one has *thought* it before" (ibid.). So, he sought to create a context in which the meaning of the sentence might be retarded in order to prevent it from becoming "unambiguously communicative²" (ibid.). This context eventually became a composition entitled, *Futility 1964*, an electroacoustic work for two channel tape that includes a recorded, spoken text written by Brün. The text refers to the decay of information, set within a binary, antiphonal structure. It addresses his problem head-on, within an implied poetic form.

The opening gesture of futility is emphatically marked with grating sawtooth wave generators. The frequency content is filtered with variable speed oscillators, sweeping up and down their designated bandwidths. The result is not unlike what one might hear in a film soundtrack to represent a strong and foreboding wind, or an alien landscape. This is interrupted by a voice speaking the text. The voice is recorded in such a way as to draw one's attention to its artifice. Brün employs a narrow bandwidth, mid-frequency filter for the voice, which effectively makes it sound like AM talk radio. The voice's limited timbral sense is in marked contrast to the richness found in the oscillator material, which includes noise, stacked sine waves, difference tones, various filters, and frequency modulation. Brün progresses back and forth from the oscillator material to the text, taking care to leave the voice either on its own, or accompanied with sparse material, in order to retain the intelligibility of the text. It is worth noting that he sought intelligibility of something that was intentionally ambiguously communicative. Each time the tape part re-enters it becomes shorter and shorter. The durations approximate an exponential shape, which is also commonly used in electroacoustic compositions for the decay or initialization of a sound.

I toLD YOu so!

Another example of Brün's use of anticommunication in his electronic music can be found in a piece entitled, *I toLD YOu so!* composed in 1981. This work is part of a series of compositions from the late 1970's and early 1980's that used a computer program of Brün's called SAWDUST. It allowed him to work with the smallest parts of waveforms, linking and merging them in order to create new hybrids. These materials were then "treated by repetition, as periods, of by various degrees of continuous change, as passing moments of orientation in a process of transformations" (2004, 314). His program note for this piece foregrounds his anticommunicative purpose: "Like many other deadly stupid phrases, this one also seems too tough to be silenced. So I buried it alive" (315). Much of the piece sounds as if he took analog recordings of a voice speaking the offending sentence, and used this material along with timbral and speed variation. It is also possible that he combined this with a resynthesis technique to generate the formants and mannerisms of speech. Whatever the case it is clear that thick clusters of waveforms are utilized for their ability to cover up. Thus, repetition and masking were employed to serve anticommunicative purposes.

Wayfaring Sounds

One of the earliest and finest examples of anticommunication in his electroacoustic music is a piece entitled *Wayfaring Sounds* from 1959. It was realized at the Siemens studio for electronic music in Munich. The piece contains pulse swarms, speechlike vowels, and restless noises. Brün used sawtooth, sine, noise, impulse, and amplitude envelope generators, as well as filters for frequency conversion and reverb, and a healthy dose of ring modulation. In short we hear an accomplished potpourri of studio techniques. Most salient is his incorporation of sonic fragments and displacements. Parts of waveforms appear when and where you least expect them. For example, attack transients are grafted onto the ends of sounds, or the steady-state parts of sounds function as attacks, etc. He also removes, or splices out, various parts of a composite sound, leaving an incomplete, displaced residue. Consistent with his title, we hear sounds going places, traveling up and down, and here and there, but always avoiding a conventional arch shape, dramatic structure.

In each of the three works mentioned the sonic materials date the piece. Rapid advances in music technology have long ago replaced the machines Brün used. Yet many of the basic synthesis principles are firmly entrenched in the most sophisticated hardware and software of today. These compositions may sound dated, but Brün's sense of playfulness and attempts to anticommunicate remain intact.

Conclusion

Theodor Adorno once said, "Music resembles a language... But music is not identical with language... to interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music. Musical interpretation is performance..." (1). Brün would probably have agreed with him. Brün's emphasis on the responsible use of language toward composition and performance continues to offer us a relevant, distinguishing description. He argued for the purposeful recognition of the social and political significance of composition, and against the tendencies of language to preempt thought. He was a composer who realized that musical

composition exists within culturally determined environments, and that composers should not only consider how their music might carry compositional thought, but also what might happen to their compositions after completing their scores. His overall aesthetic cannot be neatly subsumed within modernist or postmodernist discourse. It is instead a thorny hybrid capable of probing and revealing problems with what he called a “brutally charming” manner.

When successful, the process of anticommunication, to borrow a statement from Georges Bataille, is one whereby “starting from an extreme complexity, being imposed on reflection more than the precariousness of a fugitive appearance, but this complexity – displaced little by little – becomes in turn the labyrinth where what had suddenly come forward strangely loses its way” (173). Meanwhile expectations of efficiency, cloaked in the language of communication, press at our necks. Jean François Lyotard poignantly noted “those who refuse to reexamine the rules of art pursue successful careers in mass conformism by communicating by means of the ‘correct rules’” (75). Brün teaches us that if we listen or compose only with current expectations, then what we hear will merely be a reflection of the present and past, rather than a possibility for the future. This method may entice us to consume more, and at a faster rate, but only in reference to what we already know.

Notes

¹ The term information here refers to its use in the field of information theory. Specifically it relates to Roman Jakobson’s six-staged process of signification, which involves a sender, receiver, medium, message, code, and context.

² Examples of unambiguously communicative elements can be located in Western tonal harmonic practice (e.g. cadences, resolutions, etc.), and the primary components in the previously mentioned illusion of universality.

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