

Ricketts - Timbre presentation on Smalley:

-paper by David Hirst: "Developing Analysis Criteria Based on Denis Smalley's Timbre Theories" (Hirst, 2003)

-Smalley's original article 'Spectromorphology' (Smalley 1997) attempts to develop a vocabulary, a way of talking about, electroacoustic music, or, "acousmatic" music (from French 'acousmatique' - refers to Pythagorus who lectured his students from behind a screen - thus, sounds whose sources are unknown or hidden (usually heard through a speaker).

-also looks at "Defining Timbre - Refining Timbre" (Smalley 1994)

-Hirst finds some of Smalley's concepts "difficult" (due to the use of self-invented terminology) and requiring demystification (hence looking at Hirst and not Smalley - some critical perspective)

Begins with an anecdote by Smalley: "Timbre is one of those subjects where the more you read and the more you have hands on compositional experience the more you know, but in the process you become less able to grasp its essence."

Summary of Smalley's ideas:

-importance of sound source when discussing timbre (experience of timbre is the experience of searching for sound sources):

"timbre is a general, sonic physiognomy through which we *identify* sounds as emanating from a source, whether the source be actual, inferred or imagined")

-hence concept of "source bonding" - the tendency to relate sounds to supposed sources (and how this is affected by socio-cultural associations)

-spectromorphology is thus the study of sounds as they unfold (across time) and how their motion, growth and energy have both a sonic reality and a related "evocative" reality (which involves use of metaphor or symbolism to describe/attribute that sound's source).

-what makes timbre identification (source bonding) difficult in electroacoustic music is a question of "discourse stability and variability":

"Timbral level in traditional note-based music is quite simple. The note is the lowest level and is articulated by an instrumental source. Form develops from note articulations. In electroacoustic music continuing contexts resist and deny low-level segmentation. Thus once timbral level ceases to be clearcut we cannot separate timbre and discourse. . . "

(cannot separate because the two levels have been fused, which is also true of much instrumental music since Debussy)

"under such conditions does not the concept of timbre become so general as to be meaningless?" - in other words, when timbre is elevated to the level of musical discourse the concept is broadened wide enough to make the term quite porous / destabilized / uncertain

- . . . in particular, the issue of discussing timbre when we're confronted with its constant flux and dissolution (most electroacoustic music is not timbrally "consistent" or static) - -

"Composing with timbre, composing within timbre, means confronting and enjoying its dissolution." (how to identify, describe, that which is both transient and shifting?)

yet "There is no reason why the traditional notion of timbre should fade away. A notion of musical timbre will always exist alongside its dissolved attributes. In keeping with this ambivalence I can summarise this discourse in six words: Timbre is dead. Long live timbre." (!)

(second part missing!)