

Designing an Embodied Listening Experience within Theatre

A theatre-installation of *Cascando* a radio play by Samuel Beckett

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Introduction

Embodied listening in theatre is an unrecognised facet of the situational experience. I contend that an audience perceives the aural component of a work with their entire body, since they are situated within the same spatio-temporal setting as the performance. This fact differentiates theatre from many other 'media' experiences but is an essential attribute of the total experience. This paper gives a brief outline of my work for the Samuel Beckett production *Cascando* (2016) made in collaboration with PanPan Theatre, Ireland. Both the scenography and sound design reflect the endless walk through the maze. In many ways this perambulatory work was representative of walking inwards, the walk itself becoming almost interactive-art.



Methodology

The embodied experience introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, particularly the sense of hearing. The portmanteau *Cascando* comes from the musical term 'Calando', which is defined as a gradual decrease in both tempo and volume coupled with 'Cascade', which is to move forward. Compositionally I was looking for momentum and pace in the sound design, which I believe I achieved by incorporating the Shepard-Risset glissandi technique. This creates an auditory illusion that continually sends descends in pitch and ultimately seems to get no higher or lower, essentially it does not resolve. This technique also helped to define this work in terms of experimental sound design. I found that these auditory illusions can create a new temporal experience within the installation environment. This aural phenomenon was discovered by the cognitive scientist Roger Shepard. It is very similar in aural terms to that of the Penrose stairs made famous by the artist MC Escher. The Shepard tone could be simply described as a sonic barber pole (1992). I first heard this concept being employed as a compositional tool by Jean Claude Risset in his work *Mutations* (1969). The term has since become known as Shepard-Risset glissando (Vernooij et al., 2016).



Relevance

The most pertinent distinction is that in this piece I presented the soundscape on headphones, as opposed to usual loudspeakers. The audience moved in procession through a specifically created theatrical set of a black-mirrored maze while dressed in Moroccan djellabas, a type of long robe (see images). The audiences were now *performers* within their own Beckett play; they were at the centre of this installation, both literally and figuratively. Mary Bryden contends that when we listen to this piece, we are drawn into a stream of consciousness that has been 'structured with an acute attunement to sound' (1997, p.279). By incorporating the Shepard tone, the sonic-scenography mirrored this endless journey through the maze.

References

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Conclusion

I am interested in creating environments that immerse the spectator, compelling them to move and experience the work from different directions and spatial locations. The temporal characteristic of my work is an important aspect and could be described as brief and prolonged: brief, in that it may only exist for the duration of an exhibition and are quite literally destroyed thereafter; and prolonged, because they require the participant to engage with the work for a considerable amount of time, as opposed to the fleeting engagement of the plastic arts within a traditional gallery setting. Essentially it is this situatedness within my work that resembles or is similar to the temporal aspect of a theatrical presentation.

Listen [here](#) to the work and it is best experienced on headphones.