

Is there a conservator in the room? Electroacoustic music preservation in an era of participation

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Disciplinary background A. Historical Musicology (related to electroacoustic music studies)

Disciplinary background B. Conservation of Cultural and Artistic Heritage (related to contemporary art conservation studies)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is twofold: to foster the participation of the contemporary art conservator in studies of electroacoustic music preservation; and to attempt to bring the 'know-that' closer to the 'know-how', through conservators' expertise.

When dealing with the maintenance of the contemporary musical repertoire, especially considering the long-term sustainability of electroacoustic music, composers, interpreters and musicologists are usually faced with challenges similar to those already long handled by contemporary art conservators when working towards the preservation of performance-based artworks in the realms of conceptual art, installation art, performance art and new media art, to name but a few. With the dematerialization of the art object in the 1960s new conservation paradigms emerged along with a contemporary conservation practice. Unlike the traditional view of conservation that freezes artworks, as it deals with the maintenance of the work's physical integrity as closely as possible to its original state, an ethnographic-based contemporary art conservation practice became more usual. One that is particularly concerned with the management of change and with the notions of authenticity and artistic intent.

In fact, every conservation treatment, intervention or procedure inevitably comes with change. As in the past, conservators are still struggling in defining the limits of their interventions or the extent to which they can change a work of art. This situation is even more complex when conservators have to deal with the conservation of performance-based artworks after the 'original' event, because: i) they change over time more significantly than material-oriented artworks, and this is in part due to the fact that ii) a creative endeavour is inevitably present in any re-enactment or activation, much as in any musical performance.

Departing from this backdrop, this paper aims at presenting a first glance on whether conservators' participation can reshape and reappraise the electroacoustic music preservation practice, through a deep reflection upon current conservation principles, ethical guidelines or codes of ethics, to be analysed in the light of the historically informed performance practice, bringing together theory and practice.

Interdisciplinary implications. This paper brings together two areas of expertise, which are not usually connected, and yet a cross fertilization could be fruitful for both domains. The author has already fostered the benefits in bring to conservation literature a connection to musicological practices (Nogueira et al 2016; Marçal et al 2016; Marçal et al 2018; Nogueira forthcoming). It is time now to make the opposite journey, by connecting musicology to other facets of the ethnographic-based research as it informs contemporary art conservation practices.

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