

Jonty Harrison (1952) studied at the University of York (DPhil in Composition). In 1976 he moved to London, working at the National Theatre and City University. In 1980 he joined the Music Department of The University of Birmingham, where he is now Senior Lecturer, as well as Director of the Electroacoustic Music Studios and BEAST (Birmingham ElectroAcoustic Sound Theatre). He has been on the Board of Sonic Arts Network, the UK's national organisation for electroacoustic music for many years. His music is performed and broadcast worldwide, with several works available on CD. Prizes include: Bourges International Electroacoustic Music Awards (including a *Euphonie d'or* for *Klang*), Prix Ars Electronica, Musica Nova, Prague, Lloyds Bank National Composers' Award, PRS Prize, Leverhulme Research Grant. Commissions include: GRM, GMEB, ICMA, MAFILM/Magyar Rádió, BBC, IRCAM/Ensemble InterContemporain, Fine Arts Brass Ensemble, Nash Ensemble, Singcircle, John Harle, Harry Sparnaay, Jos Zwaanenburg.

Unsound Objects (1995)

Jonty Harrison

One of the main criteria in Pierre Schaeffer's definition of the 'sound object' was that, through the process of 'reduced listening', one should hear sound material purely as sound, divorced from any associations with its physical origins - in other words, what is significant about a recorded violin sound (for example) is that particular sound, its unique identity, and not its 'violin-ness'. Despite this ideal, a rich repertoire of music has been created since the 1950s which plays precisely on the ambiguities evoked when recognition and contextualisation of sound material rub shoulders with more abstracted (and abstract) musical structures. But as these structures themselves grow organically out of the peculiarities of the individual sound objects within them, the ambiguity is compounded: interconnections and multiple levels of meaning proliferate. The known becomes strange and the unknown familiar in a continuum of reality, unreality and surreality, where boundaries shift and continually renewed definitions are the only constant...

In *Unsound Objects*, the sounds used are all from the 'real world' - recordings of actual sonic events which have undergone varying degrees of computer modification. The work operates on three levels. The first addresses what Denis Smalley has called 'spectro-morphology' - a notion very close to the Schaefferian ideals mentioned above and which is the closest to what we understand in the west as 'music'. The second is related to 'soundscape' - recognisable, everyday sound environments which we have all experienced. The

third level of the discourse is precisely the points of interconnection (collision, friction, impact, interpenetration?) of these two apparently contradictory worlds; it is concerned with the recontextualisation of recognisable sounds and the 'meanings' released by this process - in particular, the shock of recognition caused by the familiar turning up unexpectedly or, conversely, by a strange intruder in an otherwise well known sonic space. If the material in *Unsound Objects* is - literally - elemental, then this only serves to heighten the impact of sounds as universally recognisable as water (river, sea, rain), wood, fire, birds, wind, children, thunder and the human presence implied by footsteps.

This last example is a good illustration of the enormous potential of the sonic arts for blurring the distinctions between reality, unreality and surreality - only in sound can we believe in the simultaneous presence of footsteps on the different surfaces of snow, gravel and dry bracken (as occurs at ca. 5'40 of *Unsound Objects*). Because we can recognise each situation specifically we can believe what we know to be physically impossible, even at the actual moment of hearing it. Another example: at ca. 11'30, the sound of cars passing through the stereo field (an everyday occurrence; try to cross the street anywhere in the world!) recalls the sound of thunder heard earlier in the piece and delivers us on (of all places) a shingle beach, with no cars anywhere in earshot. With the added dimension of sound diffusion over a multi-loudspeaker sound system (such as BEAST's own system in Birmingham), the sensation of actually being in a succession of physical environments evoked by their sonic fingerprints (and moving between them at the speed of sound!) can be reinforced. This triggers memories for individual listeners who can thus relate their current listening experience to their recollections of being in particular places at specific times. The boundaries and limitations of space and time have - again, literally - disappeared.

Unsound Objects was commissioned by the International Computer Music Association for the 1995 International Computer Music Conference in Banff, Alberta, Canada. It was composed in 1995 in the composer's studio and the Electroacoustic Music Studios of The University of Birmingham, England. Software used included ProTools, Sound Designer II, GRM Tools and Hyperprism (Macintosh) and the Composers' Desktop Project (CDP) software on the PC, especially *fltbank* (bank of resonant filters), *granula* (granulation) and various phase vocoder routines. Ancilliary equipment included DAT machines and (briefly) a sampler. *Unsound Objects* is available on *Articles indéfinis*, a Jonty Harrison 'solo' CD on the *empreintes DIGITALes* label (Montréal), and a further revision (1996) will shortly appear as part of the CDCM collection on Centaur.