History of Electroacoustic Music: Conceptualism

Conceptualism was a movement in the 1960s that pushed the boundaries of art. It was spurred in part by the re-evaluations of cultural assumptions that were rampant in this decade. The 1950s had been a decade of rebuilding all over the world after World War II. In America, this brought about some bizarre contrasts. America had emerged from the war as the dominant world power. Industry had been in high production throughout the war. As the war had not been fought in the US, this left America virtually unmatched in the ability to produce. Furthermore, many families had suddenly had two incomes during the war, as men who enlisted were receiving a salary, while at home wives also earned salaries working to sustain the war effort. The result was that after the war, more Americans had more disposable income than ever before. There was a feeling of confidence and prosperity, while at the same time there was an underlying absence of security. The Cold War had set in almost as soon as World War II had ended, and the threat of nuclear attack was prevalent. While people revelled in their new possessions and wealth, they also built bomb shelters in their back yards in case of attack. There was also a sense of suspicion underlying the sense of freedom and affluence. Senator Joseph McCarthy headed up the House of Un-American Activities that sought to root out communism from America. Many people were called to testify regarding suspected involvement in communist activities, and to give names of others who participated. President Eisenhower, who had commanded the US forces in Europe during the war, represented a continuing trend of uniformity and discipline.

This all started to unravel during the 1960s. John Kennedy was elected president at the age of 43, the youngest man ever to hold that office. An age of youth and new possibilities was born. At the same time, the burgeoning civil rights movement, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the violent death of Kennedy, and the subsequent military confrontation in Vietnam, seemed to rupture the veneer of comfort and uniformity of the 1950s. Now, all bets were off. Everything was open to question. The nature of war, marriage, sex, clothing, education, all were up for grabs. Timothy Leary, a Harvard professor and proponent of LSD as a tool for awakening the consciousness, encouraged America's youth to "Tune in, turn on, and drop out." At the University of California Berkeley, the Physics Department was feeling the political heat as well. Scientists were made to give oaths of loyalty and to testify before the House of Un-American Activities. In 1964, the UC Chancellor banned politicking on the Berkeley campus, bringing about a series of protests and causing many scientists to abandon their research and become social activists.

Part and parcel of this time of upheaval and questioning was a re-examination of the nature of art and music. Much of this was an outgrowth of the currents originated by the experiments of John Cage, in which the performer's intention and ego were to be circumvented. In the late 1950s, Cage taught an experimental music course at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. While the intention of the class had been to introduce American students to the musical innovations taking place at Darmstadt, many of the students took up the cause of working with chance procedures, broadening the idea to include not just works for music or sound, but also to instructions for activities or short "poems."

1 http://www.personal.psu.edu/meb26/INART55/conceptualism.html
Many "conceptualist" pieces were simply that: abstract concepts that were presented as ideas, which could in themselves be considered art. Word-pieces were meant to stimulate thought, and not necessarily be feasible as performances.

La Monte Young's Composition 1960 #15 consisted of: "This piece is little whirlpools out in the middle of the ocean." Young's Composition 1960 #5 was: "Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area."

Cage had also stated that "all music is theatre," and this idea was borne out in spades by a variety of performers who sought to blur the lines between music, theatre, and other arts. "Happenings" were interactive environments set up by artists, and the audience's interaction with the environment was the work of art. Many happenings and experimental music performances incorporated electronics as components of the experiment.

Fluxus

Started by graphic artist George Maciunas in about 1960, Fluxus was a deliberate revival of the anti-art credo of the dadaists, along with the indeterminate works popularized by those who had taken classes with John Cage. He was joined by composers La Monte Young, Richard Maxfield, and pianist and sculptor Yoko Ono. In time, many artists drifted through the Fluxus milieu. Fluxus pieces were meant to be actions or objects placed into new and ironic contexts.

In George Brecht's Motor Vehicle Sundown (Event), people were to sit in their cars and follow directions written on notecards to honk their horns, turn their headlights on and off, or open and close their doors.

Annea Lockwood's Piano Burning involved putting small contact microphones inside of a piano, splashing kerosene on it, and setting it on fire, amplifying the sound of the instrument burning.
Merce Cunningham

Choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919-), often as part of his long-term collaboration with John Cage, had begun to incorporate electroacoustic music into his performances as early as 1952, when he used Schaeffer and Henry's *Symphonie pour un Homme Seul* as music for a dance.

In 1953, David Tudor became one of the core musicians of Cunningham's company. Tudor, a pianist, specialized in creating his own electronic instruments that interacted with the dancers. One of the most famous would be *Rainforest* (1968), in which contact loudspeakers were attached to pieces of sculpture. The speakers produced electronic sounds at the resonant frequencies of the sculptures. Later versions included Cage's music played through the speakers. In Cunningham's *Variations V* (1965), dancers triggered sound in as many ways as possible. Modified theremins, designed by Bob Moog, were placed around the stage on poles. Different sounds were triggered as dancers moved within the proximity of different poles. The musicians/composers included John Cage, James Tenney, David Tudor, and Gordon Mumma. They controlled the sounds and their durations as they were emitted from various objects around the stage -- a plant, a pillow, a table, two chairs. The objects had contact microphones attached, so when dancers touched or moved them, they also produced sounds from tape, oscillators, and shortwave radios. The piece ended with Cunningham riding about the stage on a bicycle that had sound produced from its wheels.
The Once Festival

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, a group of composers and artists founded the Once Group, which produced periodic Once Festivals from 1961 to 1968 consisting of taped music, live electronics, theatre, dance, film, and opera. The festival's principal composers were Robert Ashley and Gordon Mumma. The Once Festivals became major gatherings for the weird and offbeat in all of the arts, attracting all kinds of experimentation and integration of unrelated arts and concepts.

San Francisco Tape Music Center

In San Francisco, a group of multi-media artists that included Pauline Oliveros, Raymond Sender, Morton Subotnick, Terry Riley, and Phil Winsor began to hold multi-media events that incorporated as many elements as possible -- amplified music, projections, and film. Raymond Sender's *Tropical Fish Opera* (1962) consisted of a fish in a tank swimming in front of a score, and the performers played the score by translating the fish's movements into notes or dynamics. *City Scale* (1963) involved seating audience members in the back of pickup trucks and driving them around town to different scenes that were being staged.

One of their big possessions was a three-track tape recorder that allowed them to do experiments with tape editing. They were soon joined by Don Buchla, a physicist and electrician. Buchla worked on a number of NASA projects at Berkeley before leaving the lab in protest of the restrictions being put into place. He also worked on a number of projects involving sound. One was a transistorized hearing aid. Another project, an aid for blind people, was a device that emitted a pitch that changed according the proximity of objects. (Buchla lost interest in this project when the FBI started asking about it.) Buchla also worked with tape and created *musique concrète* pieces. After seeing a performance at the Tape Music Center and their three-track recorder, he became a fixture at the Center as well.

Among the pieces that premiered there were *In C* (1964) by Terry Riley, *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) by Steve Reich, and *Desert Ambulance* (1964) by Raymond Sender. The group also hosted performances by John Cage, David Tudor, and lectures by Karlheinz Stockhausen.
Alvin Lucier

Lucier (1931-) attempted to incorporate biofeedback into performance and music. Most notable was *Music for a Solo Performer*, which featured amplified brain waves. A performer (Lucier) sat onstage as a technician connected electrodes to his head for several minutes. The performer sat quietly, and the brainwave signals were audified from an electroencephalogram (EEG). The EEG signals were amplified, and near the speakers were a variety of percussion instruments. The low frequency EEG instruments caused the instruments to vibrate. The performance ended abruptly when the performer opened his eyes.