

# D I S K U S

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## **A Rethinking of 'Religiosity' in Ireland through Sound: Meaning, Identity and Community Located within the Ineffable Sonority of an Experimental Sound Scene.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Scholarship on the interface between non-conventional music 'scenes' and religions is an emerging field of enquiry within the academic study of religions. This paper examines how, in an unorthodox music scene in Ireland, the quest for meaning and identity goes beyond what we know of conventional understandings of religion and spirituality and can be found instead within the ineffable sonority of experimental music when observed within contemporary definitions of these problematic terms. Through interviews with 'experimental' and 'live improv' sound artists and their fans in Cork City and through observations at sound events, I suggest that these seemingly chaotic sonic compositions and performances and the scene in which they are situated in Ireland could represent an important 'field' where new sites of meaning and identity and can be located.

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### **Introduction**

There can be no doubt that religious forms and practices in the Western world have changed beyond recognition in the last thirty years (Lynch and Beck 2009). For a large portion of the population of Europe, religion or religious practice doesn't feature in their everyday lives as it did in the past. Contemporary forms of religion are ever re-emerging both in overt and hidden ways in order to re-align themselves with contemporary societal and individualistic modes of living (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). As far back as 1973, Vine Deloria declared that

We can no longer speak of universal religions in the customary manner, rather we must be prepared to confront religion and religious activities in new and novel ways (Deloria, 2003, p.64).

According to Marcus Moberg, one of the new religious landscapes with which scholars in the discipline of the study of religions need to engage is in the area of popular cultures and new media (Moberg 2011). New studies have

particularly focused on how individuals or groups might attach quasi-religious meaning to their connection with certain forms of musical expression (p. 403) and in recent years there has been increasing scholarly attention focused on how intersections between religion/spirituality and music could contribute to the analysis of these new transformations. Moberg informs us that within this field of emerging research, there have been calls for studies to be more 'firmly grounded empirically and ethnographically and focused on what people actually 'do' with music in religiously or spiritually significant ways' (p. 403).

This article, based on my findings from fieldwork conducted in 2012 and 2013 on the experimental/live 'improv' and 'sound art' scene in Cork City, Ireland, aims to contribute to this emerging body of research. For this fieldwork study I held thirteen interviews, seven of which were informal face-to-face interviews. I contacted via email three people who I was unable to meet personally and I contacted all of my participants once again later in the fieldwork by email to clarify certain points. In addition I have attended and observed many experimental music events as a spectator and composer. I investigate whether what is 'done' in this unorthodox music scene could represent an area where new religious or spiritual meanings and identities may be located in contemporary Ireland.

Terms such as 'spiritual' and 'religion' are always problematic. The term 'religion' and what can be included under its heading has been widely contested and debated. Craig Martin suggests what can count as 'religion' may simply be down to what specific use one is making of the word and how one proposes to discuss it (Martin 2009, p.170). Whilst the experimental music/sound scene does not necessarily share common characteristics of the colloquial term which might describe 'religion' or 'religious' or 'spiritual', it is well documented that some of the most influential experimental composers and performers in this music field in the 1950s and 60s such as John Cage, La Monte Young and Karlheinz Stockhausen actively explored the notion of a religious or a spiritual relationship between man and God through their sonic explorations. When John Cage was asked if he believed in God he replied, "My religious involvement has been with Zen Buddhism....I couldn't have composed without its influence" (Revill 1992, ch.3). Stockhausen also believed that a connection to the 'universe' or 'cosmos' was possible through the sounds which he created and performed:

Then there naturally comes the next step, which religion originally strove for, namely to bring ourselves through music into relationship with that which we cannot grasp with the understanding, but which we can feel; with the supernatural, with that which gives life to the whole universe – with God, the Spirit who holds everything together, all the galaxies, all the solar systems and planets, and also every single one of us on this little planet (Stockhausen quoted in James 1993, p.240).

Taking Martin's suggestion of using these problematic terms in the context of what specific use one wants to make of it, for this article my idea of religiousness and spirituality were being used in same context as these

experimental innovators used them. The main aim of this fieldwork project (initially at least) was to investigate whether the 'religious' or 'spiritual' aspect of sound making described by the likes of Cage and Stockhausen still exists for modern experimental musicians as it did for their predecessors and if it doesn't, what is it that does exist instead?

Right at the beginning of my fieldwork, when I tried to explain to my first informants what the subject of our interview would be, they adamantly denied any connection for them in their sonic expressions with anything remotely spiritual or religious. There was a definite sense of anti-religion, and anti-spirituality in the air in these first few interviews so after that I decided not to mention religion at all. It seems that the problematic terms for the academic study of religions were also regarded by my participants as problematic and considered to be far too value-laden to be used when discussing what may be happening for them in their scene. As the fieldwork developed however it became obvious that what my informants are doing in their scene and what happens to them as actors in that 'scene' does hold some kind of meaning and I will be discussing this later.

### **The music, its makers and their musical tools**

Throughout this article I refer to my informants interchangeably as sound artists, soundworkers, performers, musicians, and improvisers. I use the term 'experimental' music scene as an umbrella category to include a range of experimental music styles such as 'live improv', 'minimalist', 'sound art', 'performance art', 'laptop music' or any kind of music or performance styles which use "extended music techniques and explorations of sonority" as described by John Cage (Cage 1961). One of my informants describes what he does as "uncommon practice", as opposed to 'common practice music', which is composed mainly from melody, harmony and rhythm."

When I refer to 'the instruments' or 'instrument' in this study it is useful to be aware that the majority of soundworkers in experimental music scene do not work with standard instruments. If they do, then they don't necessarily play them in the way that they are played conventionally. The sounds and music performed can be produced from any kind of a sound making item including the body (both inside and outside) and more often than not 'instruments' are electronically/digitally modified and amplified in performance. Performances could be characterized as chaotic and not like any standard musical performance most would be familiar with. Almost exclusively in this form of musical expression, performances and creations are based around the practice of what is termed 'improvisation' which is described by Pamela Burnard as

non-intentional music, produced by chance  
non-determinate and immediate in real time  
performance practice  
a piece which only exists when it is being played. The  
discovery and invention of original music spontaneously,  
while performing it, without preconceived formulation,  
scoring or context (Burnard, 2012, pp. 150-152)

These unguided, improvised performances of sonorous explorations can appear atonal, meaningless and nonsensical however, it seems that this is exactly the point of their existence. Musicologist and philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch possibly explains better what it means to improvise and experiment with sound when he describes music in itself as having 'no intelligible determinism' and that music in itself signifies nothing unless by convention or association (Jankélévitch, 2003, p.3). He describes music as a temporal art which does not exist (except at the time of its playing), it cannot be described, it is unknowable and it is therefore "ineffable". For Jankélévitch music should be allowed to be, without meaning or persuasive rhetoric, "it is necessary to think of music as 'in itself' and not in relation to something else" (p. 102). One of my informants, an experimental composer, suggests similarly that sound is of itself and that when removed from meaning and rhetoric it "takes on the guise which is nebulous, ephemeral, vague and ultimately ineffable" (Heery 2010, p. 9) and that sound should "stand on its own as a sonorous entity which has ineffable aesthetic value" (p. 71).

Jankélévitch however also proffers that music "is like the mystery of God; an inexhaustible mystery of love whose depths cannot be sounded" (Jankélévitch, 2003, p. 72). Musicologist Victor Zuckerkandl (1896-1965) proposed that

we hear forces in musical tones as the believer in God sees the divine being in the symbol and that great as the difference between musical tone and religious symbol may be, they are alike in that both have a force that transcends the material (Zuckerkandl 1956, p. 69).

Zuckerkandl puts forward the notion that it is only in "tone" where the true nature of sound revealed. It is the intangible, the invisible with no place, time, or distinctions' (Zuckerkandl 1956, p. 71). Zuckerkandl suggests that it is in this "force" of sound and hearing that we find religiosity. He believes that the ear is the only organ in the body capable of perceiving these "non physical occurrences" and that it is these "forces" which transcend the material and which could be called 'religious' or 'spiritual' (Zuckerkandl 1956, p. 58). He tells us,

in this outer world there are forces active which transcend the physical and 'the immaterial' 'spirit' or 'soul' and the material are broken through by an area of contact called 'force' (p. 373).

Did I find religiosity or spirituality within this sound scene in the same sense as Stockhausen and Cage did? No, but as my fieldwork developed it became evident that there was something 'other' (as coined by one of my informants Francis Heery, a Cork based improviser and composer) existing for my informants in their sound lives with regards to 'identity' and 'meaning'. I wondered, could the idea of this something 'other,' situated in the ineffability of this sound world, be the same thing which Zuckerkandl described as a connection to the divine?

## Topography

To avoid becoming bogged down by attempting to delve into the problematic area of definitions at this stage, I thought it more important to firstly attempt a description of my field as I observed it. Whilst I am reluctant to attach any kind of label to this scene which at its core has an aversion to labels of any kind, it appears from my analysis however, that a possible illustration of the Cork scene may be attempted by grouping certain 'shades' of actors involved in the scene together based on their sound practices and their discursive traits. I began toying with employing some general descriptors (which revealed themselves to me throughout my fieldwork). This gave me at least some way to describe the general topography of the actors within the scene. To this end I introduce the following descriptors; '*Constructors*', '*Revealers*', and '*Seekers*' which describe the types of persons involved. Then I explored the notion of adding the words '*-of purity*' or '*-of authenticity*' or '*-of freedom*' to distinguish what is the function of each descriptor, e.g., '*Constructors of purity*' or '*Revealers of authenticity*' and so forth.

As these labels were going to be applied to my informants by me I felt it important to garner the views of my participants with regards to their interpretations of the words 'purity', 'authentic' and 'freedom'. Most however, replied that these words were far too loaded with subjectivity and preconceptions to be mentioned in the same breath as their work. One informant finds the word 'freedom' to be a problematic:

I tend to avoid the phrase "free improv" (the music I am most proficient in performing) as it suggests that there are no boundaries. I would pose a question: free from what? Certain music is free of certain boundaries but still concedes to the generic properties and limitations of the idiom it exists in and so freedom is a relative term.

Another informant feels that 'freedom' is not possible even in this 'free' musical setting:

true freedom is not really a possibility - improvisers who are not restrained in what they do end up being VERY boring! Their improvs sound undisciplined and whimsical and are inevitably rambling: this is no more engaging in improvised music than it is in any other kind!

I now had a better understanding of why my other informants were unhappy about using these words to describe their sonic explorations in this way. It was also interesting that the above informants are also classically-trained musicians and it occurred to me that maybe they found it hard to shake off the constraints of this compared to other experimental soundworkers who would have had no formal musical training. This however is not subject for this paper. It was an email response from another informant on the subject of freedom however, which best hit home for me and which gave me the inspiration for my eventual group descriptors:

As you yourself observed, terms like 'freedom,' 'pure sound' etc. seem to be a preoccupation with performers. I think this may be a good indicator as to why there is a reluctance to discuss the possibility of there being any kind of wider religious connection (or for that matter any other connection, political, personal etc.). For me, the idea of adding a programmatic 'story telling' element to sound, constrains and devalues the very thing that sound/music is really really good at: being sound/music; a thing that communicates but says nothing (and not some exotic form of language, in whatever guise)

Sound in its raw state is what is most important and the main philosophy and the intentions of the actors in this scene in regard to what they create is based around an endeavour to keep sound detached from all meaning. The composer/performer sees what he/she does as simply acting as a conduit which in various ways allows these sounds to be set free and for them to simply 'be' without any implication attached. What is important to my informants in their performances, compositions and in their enjoyment of the scene as spectators, is the fact that sound simply 'is' and their creation of it is without meaning.

Martin Heidegger tells us that "The experience of the nothing is the experience of 'being' and that they are the same thing" (King 2001, p.137). This makes sense in attempting to understand the ineffable and meaningless sound world of my informants and the philosophy behind it. So taking my lead from interviews with my informants and inspired by Heidegger and Jankélévitch, I finally settled on working around using the phrase 'sonic Being' as part of my group descriptor (fig.1). These groupings are not exhaustive in any sense because there are so many crossovers in the types of people and performances involved in the scene but it could possibly be the start of a basic framework for a bigger study.

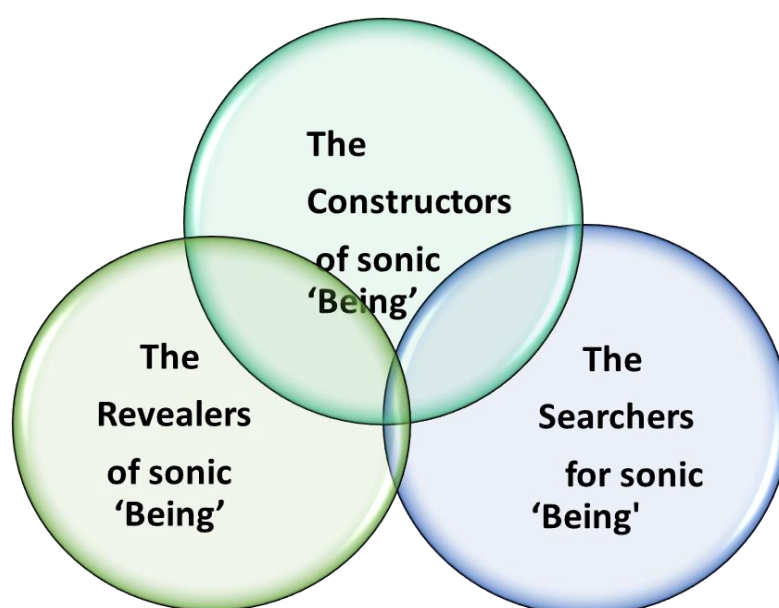


Figure 1.

### **The Constructors (of sonic 'Being')**

These are the scientifically based programmers/composers, who start from the very root or origin of a sound (sounds from the environment, or sounds they have designed themselves) and who set the organic growth of these sounds into motion through an algorithmic computer programme. They process, they layer, they build, they control and they manipulate. The words 'structure', 'non-linear', 'texture', 'building', 'environment' commonly feature in their discourses. An informant who I consider to be a 'Constructor' explains his methods:

I write pieces through technology that can become entirely different works depending on the user, the physical space, and the cognitive state. In order to build an environment that allows such features, the process becomes the composition - months of building/programming avenues to encourage individuality.

With composing computer environments for myself or others to experiment with, the performance of which encourages individuality of sonic exploration.

Another 'Constructor' informant tells me that his compositions are

all about structure

Music relates to what is going on around me, textures, structures, building structures, rhythm is irrelevant

I work in layers, I don't work in linear fashion, I don't arrange sounds in time, it's just sounds

Another tells me:

These days I often think about (a successful) improvisation in terms of growing some sort of weird sonic plant, or habitat even, in front of the audience. You sit into it, both as improviser and audience, and witness this strange somewhat alien quasi-organic life-form grow and mutate in the performance space.

### **The Revealers (of sonic 'Being')**

These are the people who demonstrate to us where an innate 'being' of sound is in existence, physically. They show us the visceral, the flesh, the body, the spit and the gore. They expose the raw sounds of instruments as it exists at the time of being, even if its basic sound has been modified by electronic means. The 'Revealers' bring sound to us simply as it exists in the very moment it is unleashed.

One 'Revealer' tells me that she likes very 'functional' ways of musical exchange and in her youth she was she was "hooked on folk records from all over the world, tribal stuff, even nailing a string to the side of the house and making sound from it." She says she "was always performing at the most

basic level and on intuition.” She was also inspired by the recordings of Inuit breathing songs/games where the mouth acts as a resonator. In her performances she strives to ‘be real, honest and hit home’ and she finds the process of performing in this way is

So open, human, compassionate and powerful with no holds barred,  
passionate, extreme  
I have a love for intense bodily art and raw ways of expression  
The physicality of performance is a very strong factor for another  
‘Revealer’. She writes via email;

When I was younger (12) I started playing drums and I think the physical force of repetition and the stamina of enduring time and pushing the body and mind to keep time creates a heightened charge. The more you play the more you can play. Your body literally increases intensity a bit like the ecstatic state of an orgasm you become part of the sound, you enter its cycle in concentration and a fluid forceful tide prevails.

Here’s another thing, we have a body and a mind, but we don’t stop at the edges of the body. We are propelled with thoughts but what is in reach and utilised is the natural sensitivity to touch. Thinking about our inter connections and psychic potential, which on a minor scale work in our daily lives leads us to the knowing.

### **The Searchers (for sonic ‘Being’)**

These are the non-performers, non-programmers who come to a gig and who like to feel the freedom and the rawness of performances but who are possibly not brave enough to try it for themselves. Instead they like to see others being playful and free and to witness the madness and the strangeness and to enjoy the unconventionality and no-holds-barred atmosphere. One ‘Searcher’ describes his experience of being an audience member in this setting as

Emotional. Its turmoil, it’s escaping the world. It re-balances an inner anxiety and provides a space of clarity  
He goes so far as to say that for him the experience is;

an elevated space where the anxieties of life are dissipated  
a mystical reality where the altered state is actually the present state, it just appears altered  
The calmest thing is listening to a singular tone, the more intricate it gets the more calm you go  
When someone switches off the music, it’s over, it has boundaries, you are returning to reality without music  
I’m caught between two worlds, it’s where you are fully synch’d (when the music is on) then you become unsynch’d or it appears that you are.



I spoke to another 'Searcher' after a gig. I particularly wanted to speak to this man because when the sets were being performed he was swaying wildly throughout especially during the part of the event where the band was 'playing' a wild cacophony of noise from various instruments (horns, balloons being let go/burst drums, fox calling devices and there was also quite a lot of screaming going on also!). This member of the audience was really getting into the vibe of the performances. He describes the performance and his reaction as follows:

Yeah that was amazing, it was just pure stuff, they were just doing what they wanted to do...I was just rockin' out, it's like finding your own rhythm within whatever's going on

When I asked him if he would have joined in with the performers, he said:

No, no I was happy out, I was thinking of screaming at some point alright but I said no, no...I was just enjoying having other people play. It's not like someone up on a stage or a pulpit and the way the lads were playing, it was nice that they were all joining in...it's just pure energy rather than being something formal, just giving it socks and not being judged.

It's not about wanting to join in but I was enjoying the fact that they were free, and I can witness it allows me to know that that's available.

### **Socio-musical structure**

It was towards the end of my fieldwork that I discovered what in fact turned out to be possibly one of the most revealing and important aspects of what happens in the experimental music scene in Cork. Whilst anarchy, rebellion and anti-religious discourses emerge as a very obvious feature of the scene, the social aspect of sound events and the social interaction between improvisers was one of the least conspicuous until I listened back to my interviews, particularly with performers and composers:

For example, improvisers respond to each other - what they do is directed by the idea that there should be interaction between musicians.

Choices of what to play depends on the other musicians and how they interact. As an improviser, I find interactions between musicians to be paramount to my work and playfulness in performance, especially when noticed by the audience, is an important interaction.

Successful results when improvising collectively ... that's very subjective, I reckon. To me, 'successful' means two equally important things: That everybody involved really enjoyed doing it and that there was a high degree of interaction between the players. Such improvisations usually result in music with sophisticated pacing and plenty of open spaces, featuring intricate multi-layered structures which relate to the performance space and its contents.

Although I don't live physically in Cork, (I'm based in [...]) my musical, sound searching out of like minds led me there, and I feel that part of me has deep connection with people I perform with there. I feel I breathe better and feel restored in certain environments akin to my own thought/process of living.

When reading Stephen Feld's ethnographic account of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, there were certain elements of their collective improvised song structures which reminded me of what the performers in the experimental music scene were telling me about how they performed with others and what they felt were important skills for an improviser. Improvising with other soundworkers appears to be a fundamental skill requirement and is a key factor in 'successful' experimental performances and as the statements above bear witness to. Similarly, Feld explains how a comparable sonic and social interaction happens in the sound expressions of the Kaluli. The performance of all Kaluli sound expression focuses upon collective texture and coordinated layered parts. No competitive agendas play out through song performance; the value of layering, juxtaposing, arching, 'lifting-up-over' and densifying are conceived as a social activity (Feld, 1984, p. 393).

Feld asserts that the egalitarian sound and social structure which he observed in the Kaluli tribe stems from their sonic interpretation of the natural world around them and this skill is gained through concentration, attention, and active listening. They live in and through sound. One of my informants asserts that similarly for the Cork experimental musicians it takes an enormous amount of concentration to be able to improvise effectively and that choices of what to play depends the musicians and how they interact with each other. Feld maintains that whilst the Kaluli recognize skill in composition and performance, their soundmaking "provides no format for the assertion of power or dominance" (p.393). In a similar fashion describing the role of musicians in the Cork scene, group performance has no place for what one of my informants calls "shouting matches" where people aren't listening to each other and there is too much going on in the performance.

The sounds which the Cork experimental musicians' experience and interact with in their daily surroundings would obviously be very different to those of the Kaluli. However, the most important aspect in the successful achievement of collective improvisation for both the Kaluli and the Cork soundworkers is through the socially negotiated interpretations of the sonic world which surrounds them. Like the Kaluli, what experimental musicians are doing in Cork is in effect the same; egalitarian, democratic performances played out in a sound based way of being social and simply 'being'.

## **Conclusion**

I mentioned in my introduction to this article that the main focus of this fieldwork study was to explore whether the experimental music scene in Cork could be a site where contemporary 'religiousness' and 'spirituality' could be located in contemporary Ireland. My starting point was to use these terms in the context of what early innovators in this music scene had experienced. It was obvious early in my research that these kinds of spiritual or religious

experiences or inspirations were not happening for my informants in the scene today. Despite the dismissals of my informants of there being a religious or spiritual element to what they do, I believe that these dismissals can be challenged somewhat. Whilst these terms (as they existed for early experimental musicians) are not useful, nor acceptable to today's experimental musicians, I refer the reader to return to Craig Martin's suggestion (from the top of this article) that a definition of 'religion' depends on the specific use that one is making of it. Thus I propose that by bracketing the above descriptors with the evidence of the presence of Heidegger's theory of 'Being' and including the socio-musical/egalitarian traits and suggesting that these elements could be defined as 'religious' or 'spiritual' specifically for the purpose of this study. I believe it can be clearly illustrated that elements of something which we could call 'religious' or 'spiritual' is indeed to be found in the experimental sound scene of Cork City. This music/sound scene displays an egalitarian social construction based around improvised sound performances and ineffable, meaningless sound and for my informants it is here where peace and tranquility are found. It may not be the kind of religiousness and spirituality which the first experimental musicians experienced back in the 1950s and 60s but it is instead a site for the re-emergence of what now may constitute 'religiosity' when defined under new terms, in contemporary Cork.

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