

Michael J. Schumacher
Diapason Gallery for Sound

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The idea for Diapason and Studio Five Beekman, the sound art gallery I ran from 1996–2000, developed out of my own work in electronic music and multi-channel sound. In 1989 I had installed a 12 speaker sound system in my apartment and was writing pieces that evolved over long time periods. I'd invite friends over to listen and hang out. In 1996 I rented a space at 5 Beekman Street near City Hall, a small suite of rooms where I created a studio with 16 speakers that was carpeted and completely isolated from outside noise. I began public exhibitions in July 1996. In January 1997 I asked David First to present a work. David created an installation with Patricia Smith and gave a live Theremin performance at the opening. About 50 people crowded into the tiny space. In the next four years Studio Five Beekman hosted 43 exhibitions by David Behrman, Ron Kuivila, Maria Blondeel, Lee Ranaldo, Alan Licht, Dean Roberts, Achim Wollscheid, and others. Robert Ashley once called it his favorite place to listen in NYC.

Diapason came about because of my friendship with choreographer Liz Gerring, with whom I've been collaborating for more than 20 years. Liz and her husband Kirk Radke would drop by Studio Five Beekman and check out the exhibitions. At this time Kirk began what has turned into more than 10 years of generous and sustained support for our programs. When I lost the lease at 5 Beekman Street, Liz asked if I'd like to share space in midtown, where she was planning to create a rehearsal studio for her company. I agreed. It was a unique opportunity, in this city of high rents, to continue and expand what had clearly been a worthwhile project at Studio Five Beekman.

I should mention the incredible support I have received from Phill Niblock, composer, film maker and director of Experimental Intermedia, who, since presenting "Ghosts and others" at Studio Five Beekman in March 1998 has been our main booster, always spreading the word and encouraging people to stop by the galleries, as well as introducing me to many of the artists I've ended up presenting.

In 2007 I moved Diapason to Sunset Park, Brooklyn, to a space that combines the best features of the previous two spaces. There's a large room with 12 speakers, conceived as a "lounge", where people can listen, talk, read and drink a glass of wine in a relaxed setting. Separated by a door, an adjoining space, about 500 square feet, contains an 8 channel sound system, is carpeted, and provides a focused listening environment. The new location is easily accessible by subway or car, and Sunset Park is rapidly becoming the next "destination" for the arts in New York City. I extend a special thank you to Lise Soskolne, who worked for

a time as Diapason's administrator and grant writer, and who located the new space and formulated the proposal to the landlords.

We attempt to create a comfortable, focused space for listening. Lighting is generally low, occasionally works are presented in complete darkness; carpets and pillows are spread out on the floor. Audiences are generally small but stay for long time periods, sometimes four hours or longer. Some dedicated fans come regularly. Sandy McCroskey deserves mention as Diapason's (and Studio Five Beekman's) most loyal listener, having attended almost every installation. As they enter, audience members take off their shoes to protect the carpets. This, along with the low lighting and the people sitting or lying down in various attitudes of focused listening, leads some people to take the experience we offer as a kind of quasi-spiritual exercise. However, the purpose of the space is simply to present electronic music and sound art in an appropriate way, in order that listeners may have the best possible chance of understanding and experiencing the work. The minimum requirements for this, it seems to me, are a comfortable space, a de-emphasizing of things visual, a low ambient noise level and a good sound system.

To date I've presented about 150 exhibitions, the vast majority of which have been sound installations. Premiers have included Stephen Vitiello's World Trade Center Recordings, David Behrman's Pen Light, Phill Niblock's Ghosts and others, Amnon Wolman's Low Ground Clearance, and my own Room Pieces.

There is probably an ideal kind of music that Diapason is the ideal space for. If I were to attempt to describe this I would probably choose words like "open form", "computer-based" and "multi-channel". I would certainly point to a work's concern with sonority in and of itself, or with psycho-acoustical phenomena. The structure would reflect these concerns, presenting the material in a straightforward way, isolating sonic events as objects to be contemplated, rather than means to an end. I am particularly interested in the potential of algorithmic forms that free the creator from concerns about "beginning, middle and end" that generally creep in to set, repeatable structures.

The one type of installation that I have actively refrained from presenting is the so-called "interactive" variety. In my opinion, listening is already interactive. The type of interaction manifested by sensors and other kinds of input devices seems to me to distract from the act of concentrated listening.

All of the works presented at Diapason use multiple speaker configurations. For the most part, they utilize the so-called "point-source" form of sound spatialization. This is a "technique", if one can call it that, whereby a sound or sounds are played through a speaker almost as though the speaker were an instrument itself. No attempt is made to coordinate the action of the various speakers for perceptual effects (localization). Whatever acoustical phenomena occur in the space (and there are many) are "allowed" and responded to

(creatively), rather than "overcome". Most works presented at Diapason avoid using spatial effects, such as the movement of sound through space, or the creation of virtual space through ambisonic and other techniques. Part of the reason for this is undoubtedly the extreme difficulty of controlling these effects, given the complexity of acoustical phenomena.

Diapason's uniqueness lies in the emphasis it places on the directness of the relationship between listener and sound. This attitude is rather idealistic, positing a pure sonic experience, unencumbered by relatedness to other activities, social or otherwise. Listening, in its unqualified sense, is fundamentally a solitary activity. It is not a projection of one's ego into another's space or a motivation for other kinds of activities, such as dancing or lovemaking. Nor is it primarily subliminal, accompanying conversation, reading, writing, exercise, etc. It is not an affirmation of a lifestyle, or of a cultural disposition. It should be approached without preconceptions, intentions or agendas. The listener, as suggested by Diapason, is a blank space on which the physical and psychological effects of sonic phenomena are written.

Of course, cultural influence is everywhere, in the creative act as well as in the act of perception. Still, there is no question that the position that formed the basis for much of contemporary musical thought, that shifted the focus of composers from the emotive intent to the physical reality of sound, should elicit a corresponding shift in the attitude of listeners. This position suggests at least the theoretical possibility for a total dissolution of cultural influence. The idea of a totally neutral space, as regards influence, where each action, sound, sight, smell, feeling or thought can be experienced in complete isolation, is very appealing to me. These, in any case, are some of the ideas that motivated the creation of Diapason as a space for listening.

My position vis-à-vis the term "sound art", as reflected in Diapason's programming, is that

- 1 it is a time-based experience. There is certainly sound art that presents its case, so to speak, in an instant, and whose meaning remains fundamentally unchanged no matter how long one listens. The works presented at Diapason, however, even when the artist has had little or no traditional musical training, are works whose meanings are understood or whose effects are enriched over time.
- 2 it is a creative activity engaged in by people involved in a variety of disciplines, that the term "sound artist" is too restrictive, and that architects, artists, composers, engineers, programmers and sculptors, for example, may be creators of sound art.
- 3 it is too soon to begin a fully realized critical approach to sound art's curation.

It seems that an attempt to create categories, spheres of influence, and lines of continuity or discontinuity with the past is premature;

- 4 sound art requires above all appropriate contexts for its dissemination (appropriate for each specific work); Diapason is a step in that direction, not an ultimate example.
- 5 a strong effort should be made to distance sound art from the influences of the art market, particularly as regards its presentation to the public, that there is a need to reject notions like “limited edition” CDs and DVDs, extraneous paraphernalia, visual accoutrements, etc.;
- 6 linkages to past practices, such as score making, should be encouraged in order to deepen the scope of the work.

There is a need for more spaces like Diapason. Every city should have a serious listening room for presenting sound art and electronic music. A town the size of New York should have three at a minimum. My suspicion is that there are plenty of people creating sound in home studios who orient their work towards the stereo CD market, compromising a basic desire to work with more flexible playback systems.

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