

“Sculpting” Sound: The Story of the CEC

**By Rosemary Mountain
Department of Music, Concordia University**

The Canadian Electroacoustic Community / Communauté Electroacoustique Canadienne (CEC) is the national organization of electroacoustics in Canada. One of its primary aims is to raise the awareness of electroacoustics in the music, art, education, and cultural fields in general. The term “electroacoustics” is used by the CEC in the broad sense to embrace electronic music, sound installations, soundwalks, musique concrete, computer music, radiophonic art, sonic art, and music for instruments and tape. The image of a darkened hall with sounds coming from speakers placed strategically around the room is appropriate to some manifestations of the art; so is the image of someone outdoors with a microphone recording the environment for transformation into a sonic documentary. The term suggests that the manipulation, investigation or “sculpting” of sound is of primary importance. Thus, although the use of MIDI keyboards by a rock band is technically electroacoustic, it is generally considered to be part of the field only if the person at the keyboard is selecting the sounds for their particular characteristics, not simply choosing a preset for playing a known tune. However, the proximity of these areas means that many young people wander into the field of “ea” by becoming fascinated with the possibilities increasingly accessible on low-priced computer systems and electronic instruments.

Another area where electroacoustics blends into the familiar is that of film and television, where a similar sensitivity to sonic

properties is required. When sound effects are designed to help portray an alien environment, such as in science fiction, then the difference is minimal. Music used within films, even when it seems to be played on violins and horns, is often composed in the studio with non-acoustic instruments. Again, the composer’s intent is what defines this music as electroacoustic. If the idea is to produce a violin line without the expense of a violinist, then the synthesizer is merely substituting. A more imaginative approach is to see such substitution as an unnecessary confinement and instead create a sonic track that is governed only by aesthetic choice.

This leads us to the fascination which all electroacoustic composers and artists share: we have at our disposal the means to produce any sound or combination of sounds and manipulate them in time and space in any way we choose. The immensity of this possibility is daunting, but also thrilling. Many of the most sophisticated ideas about sound and sonic composition are emerging from the field of electroacoustics, and it is this expertise which the CEC wishes to help disseminate. Many composers who write mainly for traditional means of acoustic sound production, such as orchestras and smaller ensembles, employ techniques and concepts which they learned in the field of electroacoustics. Instruments produce “sonic masses” which are shaped in time in the same way that they are in the studio through filtering, splicing, juxtaposing and dynamic shaping. These compositional methods have

been around since the beginning of the 20th century, if not before, but it is electroacoustics which have sharpened the senses of composers and analysts to understand their manipulation. Another aspect of electroacoustics which has slid into the acoustical world is that of the recording engineer: the CD is a much more frequent means of listening than live concert hall performances. Increasingly, professional musicians are realizing that the acoustical properties of the recording as well as the recording space are crucial to the listener's appreciation of the work.

The CEC dates from 1986, when it was co-founded by Kevin Austin and Jean-François Denis. These two individuals, still active in the field, are based in Montréal, and the community has deep roots in that city, although representation is found across Canada and abroad. Not all electroacoustic composers and sound artists in Canada are CEC members, and neither is the membership exclusively composers and artists. Rather, the CEC attempts to represent the concerns which practitioners are likely to encounter, and encourages anyone who believes in its mandate to join. At present, there are 150 individual and institutional members.

The ways in which the CEC tries to fulfill its mandate of developing and improving the context for electroacoustics in the country are necessarily varied. As one of the casualties of the Canada Council funding cuts several years ago, the CEC has relied almost exclusively since on the goodwill and energy of its members. Due to the nature of electroacoustics, the move to a virtual existence has been relatively easy. Most members have e-mail and Web access so, to cut costs, bulletins and the journal *contact!*

were transformed into electronic format. In addition, the establishment of the list-serv <cecdiscuss> by Kevin Austin exceeded all expectations and is now an extremely active discussion list with 450 subscribers, including some of the most prominent names in the field internationally. The topics range from aesthetics to computers, and there are also postings of relevant radio shows, concerts, festivals, and conferences around the world.

The visible success of the list-serv as a tool has led to the establishment and functioning of other lists: three important closed and moderated ones are <cecbord>, <lecaïne> and <trudy>. The Board of the CEC, which is scattered across Canada, discusses issues in this way rather than spending time, money, and planning on traditional face-to-face meetings. The <lecaïne> list-serv has been established as a means for educators to discuss issues relating to the inclusion of electroacoustics into the educational context. The <trudy> list was set up to ensure a high level of community feedback, with its members nominated from various cultural organizations in the country.

Another appropriate use of the Internet is shown in the YESA project. This project is designed to stimulate activity and recognition of Young and Emerging Sound Artists, and involves the invitation for submissions of electroacoustic works of short duration which are all performed publicly. The pieces are all placed on a hidden Web site, where jury members may hear them "live" or download them for later listening. The jurors then post their marks to this Web site, and the top-rated works are recorded onto a CD (entitled *Cache*) which is then distributed through the CEC mailing list of radio stations, sister

organizations, festival coordinators, members, etc. The works are also placed onto a publicly-accessible site within the CEC Web site and the public is invited to vote. The winners – one chosen by the public and the rest by jurors – are awarded prizes such as CDs donated by CEC supporters.

The CEC Web site is probably the most noticeable of all its “virtual” activities. It includes sound “bites” and several entire pieces as well as information, links, Web radio, and a growing volume of important articles published in the electronic journal *econtakt!* The articles are grouped according to themes such as the history of electroacoustics, women in electroacoustics, soundscape and acoustic ecology, interviews with composers, and reviews of pieces. The address of this invaluable resource is <<http://cec.concordia.ca>>.

Somewhere between the real and the virtual lives the CD, of which the CEC has produced several in the last few years. Not only is there *Cache2000* (the YESA project CD, reviewed in this issue of CAML) but also the four double sets *DisContact* I and II and *Presence* I and II. These latter compilations provide a good cross-section of electroacoustic works by members and affiliates. The *DisContact* CDs are all short clips of 3 minutes or less; some were composed specifically for the CD, while others are excerpts of longer works by CEC members. The *Presence* CDs are sponsored by the composers themselves, and are sent worldwide via the CEC. These CDs have helped considerably with the exposure of Canadian sound artists in the international sphere. They have been played at numerous festivals and on radio programs to enthusiastic response.

Despite its success in the virtual world, many CEC members long for more balance between the virtual and the real. Although we are accustomed to hearing and reading disembodied sounds and messages, we also need our real acoustic spaces and face-to-face contact. The exhilaration of the various conferences held by the CEC in the late 1980's and early 90's is still fondly remembered by many in the community. Efforts are being made to organize more in the future, although such plans require substantial funds and institutional support. An increasingly noticeable effect of the move to virtual is the disappearance of the CEC as a visible entity to those who are not “Web-savvy.” This is a serious problem, because one of the major long-term problems facing the electroacoustic community is marginalization.

That marginalization has been particularly evident to this writer, who has worked in the field of music theory for the last 15 years. As a composer of acoustic and electroacoustic works and a collaborator and friend with many artists of diverse practices, I have become acutely aware of the unsuitability of traditional music theory and analysis for many significant 20th-century works. Electroacoustics is an exceptionally clear example, as it is generally unaccompanied by a score. Thus, analysis has to rely on the ear and possibly on graphic diagrams produced by the composer, theorist, or computer (in the form of spectrograms, etc.). The latter may be the easiest to produce, but are useless without interpretation. We know when we look at a series of dots which represent an F major chord followed by a series of dots which represent Bb major that we may have a dominant-tonic relationship in the music. What electroacoustics teaches us is that such methods are often inadequate, even for conventionally-notated music, because

they usually ignore aspects such as timbre and dynamic shaping that have become increasingly relevant organizational strategies. By extension, the work being done in ea is proving invaluable to the study of many more avant-garde and experimental non-electroacoustic works.

Children generally find it easy to accept all sounds as potential art-material. Watching the response of an interested child belies the stereotype that electroacoustics is an esoteric field only for computer nerds. Electroacoustic music should be included in the early stages of music education, as is done now in the U.K. It

should also be included in regular concert programs, collections of Canadian music, and radio programs outside the innovative community-based ones. Eminent artists and pioneers such as Hugh LeCaine, Otto Joachim, Anne Southam, Francis Dhomont, Kevin Austin, Robert Normandeau, and Barry Truax should be well-known for their contributions to Canadian culture through electroacoustics. The CEC is currently limited by lack of financial support and the overtaxed energy of its volunteers, but the vision remains broad: to place electroacoustics as a full participating member in the cultural life of Canada.

