

## Composition: Electronic Media I

Aug. 29, 2005

### Acousmatics

1. The term acousmatic is borrowed from Pythagora's cult ca. 500 B.C on the island of Croton, near Italy. The group was divided into two camps:
  - a) mathematiks, comprised of men only, who studied pure mathematics;
  - b) akousmatics, comprised of women and men, who studied sound.
2. Pythagoras lectured from behind a screen, so as not to distract the listener by his physical presence. Thus, sound was separated from its source.
3. French musique concrete composer Luc Ferrari resurrected the term "acousmatique" in the 1970s and applied it to music whose sound sources were generally (but not always) natural sounds. These sounds were disconnected from their sources, so from an acousmatic standpoint, no single sound had a referential meaning. To borrow a phrase from American music theorist Leonard Meyer (ca. 1967), such sounds organized in a composition would be said to have an "embodied" meaning.
4. Acousmatic schools developed during the 1980s and 90s, in:
  - a) France: Luc Ferrari, Michel Chion, Elsa Justel, Denis Dufour, Beatriz Ferrara
  - b) England: Denis Smalley, Jonty Harrison, Pete Stollery, John Young, Natasha Barrett
  - c) Canada: Francis Dhomont, Robert Normandeau
  - d) US: Elaine Lillios, Paul Koonce, Lawrence Fritts
5. In the broadest sense, acousmatic composition treated recorded sound as material for building up complex sounds, sometimes akin traditional sound synthesis. Robert Normandeau once described the process as "opening up the hood of a car and getting dirt under your fingers."
6. Acousmatics has inspired a new genre of electro-acoustic music: Ecological sound. An ecological sound composition typically features long takes and subtle, complex mixes of environmental sounds, such as rain forests, oceans, car traffic, etc. These are compositionally presented as being relatively free of composer intervention in the studio.
7. Some acousmatic composers have branched off into a yet another new area, referred to a "cinema of the ear." Here, the sounds of a composition are organized in a narrative fashion.