Fear of the Known: Evoking Narrative Elements in Lovecraftian Futurist Sound Composition

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(Please note this is a rough draft of a paper currently being researched, and is intended for conference-goers to prepare for the presentation given on May 1st, 2021. Some citations may be needed and some new information may be added.)

Alfred Gell (1998) argues that artists produce works with a level of "intentionality," referring to the concept that creative works embody or promote the underlying goal (overt or not) that the producer of the work desires to associate with that work. This is a very broad notion limited to certain anthropological theories and some scholars, such as Layton(2003) and Bowden (2004), refute the absolutism of this concept, however, in the case of composers who claim openly to be inspired by Lovecraft (or related writings), it may be safe to assume there is a level of intentionality associated with the creation of the pieces. Generally speaking, that association can be discussed in terms of evoking Lovecraftian narrative elements, defined here as more concrete aspects such as settings, characters, or places, and somewhat more abstract aspects, including (intended or perceived) emotive reactions.

Working with the assumption that composers who write Lovecraft-inspired pieces intend to evoke some elements of Lovecraftian horror (literature), composers have many possible paths to follow to realize this goal. There is a plethora of aspects a composer can employ that would allow a presentation of what could be considered a "Lovecraftian work." One of the most common aspects and one that arguably can be considered to link many Lovecraftian narrative elements can serve as a useful focal point for discussion, that being the thematic tenant in Lovecraftian literature of "fear of the unknown."

Fear of the unknown, taken as an intentionality that a composer attempts to realize, may or may not be difficult to evoke, however, breaking down the tools a composer has at their disposal to enable reaching this goal, a composer effectively only has one: sound. Using sound to evoke a fear of the unknown (either by representing a fear of the unknown or by attempting to instill a fear of the unknown) can take many forms, including one possible course of action: creating sounds that are less familiar to the audience. This approach and goal come with some additional considerations. If a composer is attempting to realize an intentionality and do so through a given technique, the effectiveness of the methodology and how that effectiveness is measured may come into question. The effectiveness of a piece's realization of intentionality may be judged by the listener (audience, critics), the performers, and, perhaps obviously, the composer themselves. Each of these "judges" will have a different reaction how "Lovecraftian" a sound or collection of sounds may be. The criteria for each judge, and what informs their decisions will also be notable different, and possibly unmeasurably so. What can be said, however, is that composers will have an internal working knowledge on which the intentionality is based, therefore the effectiveness of a piece that realizes that intentionality can be judged (by the composer) directly, based on the inspirational material and possibly the expected or

unexpected elements of performance, given that some pieces may have a varying level of prescriptive notation yielding a wide or narrow tolerance for musician interpretation. Musicians share some of the same criteria, specifically, the interpretation of performance (and in the case of Lovecraftian Futurist works, often the selection of instrumentation is left to the performer). Musicians also share judgment criteria with the listeners, as well, though, given that they, quite simply, are not the composer, and their knowledge of the sounds used and the Lovecraftian narrative these sounds are intended to evoke may differ greatly from the composer.

A composer, then may seek to align their listener's (and performers) thinking with their own as much as possible to increase the effectiveness of a piece realizing the composer's intentionality. The issue this presents is that in order for realizing intentionality that involves the hope that listeners will be less familiar with a specific sound (and probably how that sound is generated), there is an element of maintaining secrecy of certain factors related to a composition. Conversely, the composer may also hope that the listeners are extremely familiar with the cannon of Lovecraftian works that relates to the piece. Two juxtaposed situations that require initially separate then combined approaches in addressing them.

Sound Evoking Lovecraftian Narrative Elements and Fear of the Unknown

Returning to the tools at the disposal of a composer, a sound artist will need to consider how to employ these tools in order to evoke the sense or representation of fear of the unknown. Generally speaking, a composer will most likely embrace the very basics of composition to express a fear of the unknown (or simply something unknown) using harmony, melody, rhythm and tempo, and timbre, much of which is affected by the composer's selection of tuning systems and instrumentation choices. Distilling this further, instrument choices and their timbres and tunings can be seen as the key factor in escalating a sense of unknowing within a listener. When a listener engages with a sound, especially one that they cannot visually associate with how the sound was generated, that sound may become highly effective in terms of assisting in realizing the composer's (Lovecraft-related, fear of the unknown) intentionality if that sound is less familiar to the listener.

When listeners engage with a sound, they have the opportunity to analyze that sound and relate it to what they perceive as being the source of the sound, as well as what that sound may represent. Keeping in mind this may be an optional response to a sound, meaning there may be a conscious effort to not consider the source of a sound, there may also be subconscious reactions to sound as well as active ones. Composers will most likely take into account both conscious and subconscious responses to sounds within a piece, somewhat ignoring the percentage of listeners who purposefully avoid considering sound sources, actively or passively, as the latter is beyond concern and bypasses the listener's engagement with the sound. In the former cases, a listener's engagement with sound can be likened, at least in a vague parallel, to Toulmin's theory of making and supporting a claim. In *The Uses of Argument* (2003), Toulmin outlines how an event or situation, which he calls the "grounds" for an argument, can spark someone familiar with that event or situation to make a claim. That claim is based on what he calls the "warrant" for the claim, which, in essence, is the knowledge base that the maker of the claim is using to conclude the claim being made. Taking the sounds presented by a composer (and performer) as the grounds for a claim, a listener can (and perhaps often will, subconsciously or actively)

make a claim as to what generated that sound or from where the sound came. The information a listener uses to make their claim is akin to Toulmin's concept of a warrant, and that warrant is informed by the knowledge base of the listener.

In an example presented by Purdue University (2020) on their website explaining the Toulmin argument conception flow, the grounds for a claim are given as a listener hearing howling in the distance. The listener makes the claim that there must be a dog in the vicinity, basing the notion on their knowledge that dogs are capable of howling. (The example goes on to expand the idea, presenting counter arguments to the claim, that there are other animals that howl, such as wolves, but given the additional supporting knowledge the listener has of animals in the area and first-hand experience that a neighbor owns dogs, the listener strengthens their claim that the sound is made by a dog and thus suggests this claim is more feasible than the alternate claim.) A composer can utilize this concept to potentially empathize with a listener, and consider what they may claim is the source of a sound, thus allowing the composer to analyze their choices for sonic elements to include in a composition which can assist in increasing the unfamiliarity of a sound for the listener, the goal being a more unfamiliar sound may lead to a greater sense of the unknown (and/or fear of the unknown), thus a greater association with the composer's intentionality of the piece.

The assumptions here are, perhaps, overly constrained, and a multitude of additional considerations may arise. The level of unfamiliarity can be useful or it may be over- or under-estimated, resulting in a response that undermines, rather than supports, the composer's goal. If a listener is overly familiar with how a sound is generated, perhaps they will lose association with the (fear of the) unknown factor and thus the Lovecraftian association. Alternately, if a listener is extremely unfamiliar with a sound, it may not retain the Lovecraftian association it was originally intended to evoke. Both of these situations, and any balanced situation in between, will be dictated by the warrants supporting any claims the listener may make when engaging sound(s) presented by a composer/performer. It is this knowledge base that can assist a composer as well as present disruptive elements when attempting to tailor a composition to support a specific intentionality (Lovecraftian narrative element) through sonic selection and implementation.

Familiarity with Lovecraftian Literary Cannon

Reading stories obviously involves a linguistic account of some description. That account will have global, cultural, personal, and other semiotic associations with the language used and the narrative being conveyed. The semiotics of language is only partially the concern of a discussion based on compositional evocation of Lovecraftian narratives, however, a parallel concept – sonic semiotics – is at the root of what may be considered a large part of realizing a composer's intentionality. Similar in nature to the concept that a knowledge base possessed by the listener informs them of claims they make regarding the origin of a sound, a knowledge base likewise informs a listener on claims made when associating sounds with a literary cannon. Please note that no claims are being made here of extensive knowledge of semiotic studies and theories. Exceptional texts are available on a wide range of semiotic discussions by Eco, Pierce, Greimas, Halliday, Barthes, and many others. There is also no intention of promoting Structuralist theory, per se, even though, perhaps ideas put forth by Levi-Strauss, problematic though they may be, have a place in this concept of linking stories with sound. Instead, the

intention here is merely point out that for a listener to associate sounds (without direct linkage) to Lovecraftian narrative elements, the listener will necessarily need to have some level of knowledge of Lovecraft and related works.

Knowledge of the Lovecraft or related work(s) that inspired a sound composition may not be enough to associate the sounds with the work(s) in question enough to realize the composer's intention, but it is it necessary for that knowledge to exist if there is to be a chance for that association to be made. Personal experience can serve as an example: a friend contacted me once, when I was living in Paris in 2017, to let me know she loved one of my compositions and had been playing it for her friends (Stevens. 2017). It turned out, though, she had no association of the music with Lovecraft or anything remotely related to the Cthulhu Mythos. Instead she was using the piece as background music for a yoga club she hosted at the time and several women in a park in Paris were stretching and exercising to the sounds of my compositions, possibly confusing passers-by or perhaps inundating them with similar compositional interpretation. The group of yoga practitioners was apparently completely unaware that the unfamiliar timbres and increasing dynamic tensions were meant to evoke a Clark Ashton-Smith story about Tsathoggua. A la Appadurai, the piece (as with all pieces) gained a life of its own once it was recorded and released, and in this case, the composer intentionality was completely negated by a lack of knowledge of the inspirational material, which lead to an unexpected (although, still personally satisfying) association and enjoyment of the work. Had the women known more about the composition, they may not have used it for their club exercise, or perhaps they would have, but would have simultaneously appreciated its original intentionality, as well. Either way, the listener knowledge base in this instance, and most likely all instances, can determine the realization of composer intentionality as it relates to the Lovecraftian narrative elements being evoked.

Coping with Fear of the Known (Unfamiliar Sounds)

The concern for composers who are attempting to evoke Lovecraftian narrative elements through presentations involving or supported by a fear of the unknown that uses unfamiliar sounds becomes two-fold, and both factors relate to what the listener may or may not know. In order for a composer to effectively utilize unfamiliar sounds to support a sense of the unknown, the composer must rely on the knowledge base of the listener regarding sounds and how they are generated. Additionally, in order for the composer to effectively link their works to a Lovecraftian narrative or related element, the composer must rely on the knowledge base of the listener regarding the cannon involved. Both of these have one major, possibly fear-inducing (for the composer) element of their own: both factors cannot be controlled, generally speaking, or even measured or tested.

Addressing the knowledge base of a listener can lessen the issues surrounding the potential responses or lack thereof on the part of the audience. Possible ways to address these two aspects of the listener's mental knowledge base are, in a way completely opposite. In reference to evoking a sense of the unknown, a method to increase the chances that a listener will be less familiar with the ways in which a sound is generated, and therefore increase the potential that they will cultivate a sense of the unknown is to, perhaps obviously, employ a palette of sounds that has a higher chance of being unfamiliar. Composers select their instrumentation based on several factors including preferences of timbre, availability of players, commission constraints, narrative factors, familiarity of performance

techniques, cultural or historical associations of the instruments, and much more. All choices, to some extent, however, are made based on the timbre of the instruments and therefore how the sound the instruments make is generated.

The ways in which musical instruments make sound is the basis for some taxonomy systems, including the commonly-taught Sachs and Hornbostel classification system. The usefulness of understanding this system of taxonomy is that it gives a base for knowledge of how all sounds are created (at least within the discussion of compositional instrument selection and timbral palettes). Briefly, Sachs and Hornbostel (1914) presented groupings of how air (transmitter of sounds) is compressed into waves (sound being transmitted). Originally, they outlined Aerophones (air being compressed and released in a wave format, such as vibrations in a flute), Chordophones (air being compressed by vibrating strings, such as violin), Membranophones (air being displaced by a vibrating membrane, such as a drum head), and Idiophones (air being displaced by the movement of a solid body, such as a bell ringing). Later, the system was revised to include Electrophones (electronically generated waves transmitted through speakers, such as created by a keyboard or computer) and Corpophones (sounds generated via the human body, even though these will fall into one of the other four original categories). There are many, many other ways of organizing musical instruments (Kartomi's classification system that focuses on instrument functionality and intended cultural or social purpose, for example), but understanding the basic physics behind the sounds can assist the composer in reducing the understanding or reversing the expectation the listener may have in regards to how a sound is generated.

Composers who prefer to employ standard Western instrumentation have a unique set of concerns. Typically, almost any listener (regarding a typical listener in this instance as someone who would engage with a Lovecraft-inspired sound presentation) will at least be familiar with the way a sound is made on any given Western classical instrument, if not recognize the specific instrument being used. This would suggest that a composer who wishes to reduce the familiarity with that instrument which the listener could have may want to attempt to select less-familiar instruments that are still within the Western standard instrument range. For example, a triple contrabass clarinet over a more commonly played bass clarinet, or C- or D-trumpet rather than writing for a Bb-trumpet may prove to be effective in supporting the composer's intentionality. Working with other compositional factors, such as tuning systems, harmonic and melodic interactions, and rubato tempos may assist in realizing a sense of the unknown, and these approaches are certainly valid and require skill mastery to reach what may be considered an effective realization of composer intentionality. There are additional options and approaches, as well, though, each with their own considerations to be taken into account by the composer.

If a composer is comfortable introducing unconventional notation into their prescription, employing extended techniques can be a valuable means to achieving a level of unfamiliarity. Extended techniques invite the performers to use their instruments in ways not traditionally intended by the makers and designers of the instrument. Clicking the keys of a saxophone, buzzing one's lips when blowing through a flute or brass instrument, or playing the inside of a piano are a few examples. Using extended techniques is common in many 20th Century experimental styles of music, including Afrofuturism, Improvised Music performance, and various forms of avant-garde concert music. In addition, "preparing" an instrument, meaning affixing additional noise makers to an instrument to cause

it to make unusual sounds is another option. Famously, David Tutor and John Cage regularly employed this approach to expand their palette of sounds for a given instrument, such as wedging screws and springs in between strings on a piano, or taping cardboard strips to cymbals. The benefits of incorporating extended techniques and instrument preparation afford the composer with the option to write for the instrumentation commonly available, while still expanding sonic possibilities. The consideration to be made, though, is that notating for extended techniques can be less prescriptive than what is commonly assumed with standard Western notation. Writing that employs extended techniques in not new and is no different that writing in a more traditional fashion, and does not make composing more or less difficult; it simply adds timbral possibilities, which can assist a Lovecraft-inspired composer in reaching a goal of expressing their intentionality.

Also drawing from Afrofuturism and other 20th Century experimental compositional approaches (a la Harry Partch () comes the notion of purpose-made instruments or "little instruments" (as Afrofuturist saxophone player Roscoe Mitchell referred to them (1996)). These instruments are sound-making devices that are created with the sole purpose of adding unique timbres and performance possibilities into a composition. There are additional cultural connotations as well that can be expanded or embraced for a composer to engage further with Lovecraft-inspired music. Mitchell (Ibid.) described "little instruments" as being creations that come from one's cultural background and support the representation of that culture through new sounds in music. Little instruments can be anything from something played more traditionally, but have a less common timbre, to something that is played very unconventionally and only has one sound, typically one that would be difficult to create otherwise. One example of this is a 13-sided frame drum that was used in the recording of *Opening the Thirteen Gates of the Necronomicon* (Seesar. Sombre Soniks. 2017). The performance technique used with the drum was fairly traditional, but the timbre was more unique, given the physical characteristics of the drum and it was built with a direct connection to Lovecraft in mind. Another example would be a simple spring stretched across a wooden resonator, played with a cello bow. The instrument makes effectively one tone, and creates a naturally reverberated drone, but one that is uncommon-sounding for the most. Incorporating purpose-built instrumentation presents the issue that the instrument's availability may be scarce, but it greatly increases the possibility that the listener will find the sound it makes unfamiliar, thus strengthening the effectiveness of realizing the composer's intentionality.

Similarly, drawing from Dadaism and Gothic Futurism, ready-made instruments or instruments created from ready-made objects can also greatly expand the sound palette at a composer's disposal. Including sounds of blowing across an empty bottle, scraping a moving bicycle tire, employing a "buzzophone" made from a straw, bottle, tube, and a rubber glove, or even merging purpose-built instruments with found objects, similar to Rammellzee's skateboard-ray gun-zither can all enhance the sonic palette of a Lovecraft-inspired composer. Furthermore, traditional instrumentation outside the Western cannon of standard instruments can be used, but note here that cultural association is strong and these instruments may not be suitable, especially when attempting to create sounds that have as little association with non-Lovecraftian narratives as possible.

Leaving the instrumentation selection to the performers is also a potential option. Contemporary Lovecraftian Futurist composers occasionally borrow from Italian Futurist composition practice, and write for families of sound, rather than specific instruments. This shifts the expectations of sonic realization to the performer more than the composer, but still gives relative control to the

composer for sonic combinations and dynamics. The realization of composer intentionality in such composition relies less on the specific instrumentation, and more on the ways in which instruments and performers interact, but there is still an element of timbral guidance that can lead to the listener being less familiar with the sounds used to realize the piece.

None of these approaches to expanding a composer's sonic options is new or unexpected. The point here is that there are several possibilities available to a composer to assist them in evoking a Lovecraftian narrative if their goal is to embrace a notion of fear of the unknown on some level. Creatively incorporated use of extended techniques, purpose-built, ready-made instruments, or simply clever use of standard Western instrumentation and performance methods can all be helpful, if the target of maintaining a lower level of familiarity with the sounds and how they are generated is instilled in the listener.

Coping with Fear of the Known (Lovecraftian Cannon)

Conversely, instead of reducing the familiarity a listener may have with the original Lovecraftian cannon, addressing the level of knowledge at a listener holds regarding the work(s) that inspired the composition involves putting the listener in a position to better educate themselves, if needed, or provide them with reminders of the material, if they are already familiar with it. There is one major obstacle given this goal – composers work with sounds that may not have direct semiotic association (or enough semiotic association to effectively inform the listener's personal knowledge base, and thus inform the warrant/claim the listener may make). A recourse the composer can take, however, deals with employing non-musical devices.

This may sound difficult or impossible outside of writing songs or operas with lyrical content (also, lyrical content is musical), but non-musical devices are common among composition presentation of all types. Musical presentation can take one of two forms – recorded or live performance. There are many types of these two forms, but anything can be reduced to one or the other. Both, however, have attachments and associations that can assist the composer with clarifying composer's inspiration and boost the chances of effectiveness realizing the intentionality. Live concerts are often accompanied by a program and recorded music may have liner notes. Both live and recorded performances can be presented with one of the most effective tools to convey associations and intentionality: visuals. Video art, still photography, film, and live action movement artists can all be employed. Listeners also watching the music being creating may lose some of the potential sense of the unknown discussed above, but not necessarily or completely, and merging the roles of the players, making them both musicians and visual elements of the presentation can deepen the association the composition has with Lovecraftian narrative elements.

Other non-musical devices include preparation or hind-sight discussion. Concerts may have a post-performance question and answer session; radio or printed interviews can give a composer the outlet needed to further explain anything ambiguous relation a piece may have with Lovecraftian horror; writings by the composer themselves can also be a definitive means to ensure greater effectiveness of the realization of intentionality.

The most common method, and one that is almost always employed, is the titling of a piece. A simple, well-constructed linguistic association as a title for a work can be all that is needed to ensure the

listener will formulate a reasonably close association to the composer's intentionality, at least to the degree that if they are remotely familiar with the cannon, they will understand the broad relation to the piece, and if not, they have the information needed to research and read for themselves, given they have the incentive to do so. Titles are also often linked with release art, although not always. Some composers will opt to not record or collect works in a release without a specific theme, but in the situation where a thematic release of similar or linked compositions is possible, the combination of titling and cover art imagery can be an invaluable tool for the composer to display intentionality of evocation.

Opposites Working Together

Each of these approaches to helping realize a composer's intentionality have a good potential to be effective by themselves, but merging the two and using each one to support the other is even notable more effective. Composer's tools, as it were, are far from limited to the short list mentioned above. Representing the Lovecraftian narrative elements with unfamiliar sounds should not impede the use of tension, dynamics, timbral interactions, and cadences to support whatever the composer wishes to convey. Furthermore, linking these together with linguistic or visual aids will not only potentially educate the listener, but invite engagement based on that education to associate the sounds with the narrative elements more successfully.

Another example from personal experience can illustrate this point. Recently, in mid-2020, I was approached by a record label in the United States who was compiling a collection of tracks to release as a benefit for the American Civil Liberties Union's George Floyd Fund (an anti-racial profiling police re-training program) (Seesar. Ambient Online. 2020). I submitted a track that was based on a section of *Herbert West: Reanimator* (the chapter entitled *Six Shots by Moonlight*) in which West "kills" one of his reanimated corpses by shooting the victim until his gun is empty. The composition has no words, uses a variety of unusual sounds, and starts off with six sharp, booming reports that leads into a dark, ambient soundscape. The producer of the album contacted me after I submitted my piece and asked me to further explain the recording. He was unfamiliar with the Lovecraft work, and therefore did not recognize the title, *Return of the Pugilist*, nor did he recognize the sounds at the beginning which were created using a rubber band snapped against a box with a pillow in stuffed in it, and a touch of reverb added in the studio. I paraphrased the story, where West stole the body of a black man who was a boxer beaten to death by a white racist in an underground boxing circuit, then West reanimated the boxer, who then took the life of an immigrant boy (all the reader knows about the boy is that he was poor, probably Italian, but maybe not, and his life was not valued at all by the local authorities or West), then, afterwards, Herbert West remained nonplussed about the situation until the reanimated boxer returned to West's lab and where he was shot by West in the night. Once the producer understood the inspiration for the piece, he also saw the relation of the piece to the ACLU benefit. He realized my intention of exposing West as the "real monster" and understood the six noises at the beginning of the piece. He also was confused because he thought that my recording was entirely electronic, when in fact, none of it is. All sounds were made acoustically, which made him more confused (according to him (2020)), but it also instilled a greater interest in the track within him, leaving him guessing what other items and extended techniques I had used to create the soundscape. He has my explanation of the track

available to any buyer of the release who is interested in finding out more about the connection between my sounds and the intentionality behind the work.

There are many ways in which a composer may utilize sound and non-musical devices to enhance the success of their pieces. Although these devices may or may not fully bring the effectiveness or clarity the composer desires, and the response of the listener may well differ greatly from the composer's expectation, a working knowledge of how a listener may formulate a response, then acting to guide that response can potentially result in a deeper understanding of a composers work, an appreciation for the decisions made to realize the work, and strengthen the evocation of Lovecraftian narrative elements as the composer intended, affording the composer to navigate through their own fear of the known to successfully express a fear of the unknown.

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