

# Mobile phone music. Sound Art and ‘mobile devices’

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## ABSTRACT

In order to find out how artists and musicians use mobile phones in their installations and concerts I analysed several pieces of mobile phone music. Not only did I focus on the sound, but also asked which social changes within society are reflected in the pieces. The four key features of the mobile phone – it is mobile, always switched on, potentially always connected and digital – help understanding this new medium. The spreading of the mobile changes the production and distribution of music, from the desktop to the streets.

Finally mobile phone music is discussed as Sound Art, by looking at the applied technology or rather New Media, and other aspects such as intermediality, interactivity and space.

## Keywords

mobile phone music, Sound Art, social changes

## INTRODUCTION

Within the solemn silence of a concert hall, a mobile phone suddenly begins to ring. This might be an example for the mobile phone’s sound impact on every day life – but it might as well be part of an artistic work of mobile phone music. Recently there has been quite a lot of research on the mobile phone. The visual paradigm has been all dominant once again: there has been no sound based research. Which sound-based effect does this device have on every day life, on the urban soundscape, the personal auditory lifestyle? And how do artists and musicians use this new medium in their works of sound art?

## FEATURES OF THE MOBILE PHONE

To answer these questions it is necessary to discuss the distinctive features of mobile phones. The mobile phone is - as the term already suggests - mobile, as well as always switched on, digital and potentially always connected. The combination of them is unique and a key to understanding the sound impact of the mobile phone. Our society is often described with similar features: the digital, connected,

mobile society. There is no other device with this combination of features, and no similar device is as widespread and integrated into every day life. This makes it a significant indicator for current sound based changes within society.

## PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF MUSIC

Mobile phone music has the potential to change the production and distribution of music. I assume that, especially in countries where neither computers nor the Internet is common, the spreading of the mobile phone will bring many exciting developments. Increasingly cell phones will be used to produce and distribute music. Countries and social classes which so far had no access to digital production and the distribution of music, now have plentiful access to a device able to achieve both: the mobile phone. The production and distribution of music shifted from the professional studio to the private PC through computer and Internet. Along with the spreading of the mobile, distribution and production will shift once more: from the desktop to the streets.

Just imagine street musicians in a remote part of the world, one of them playing the guitar, one rapping, another one producing drum and bass sounds live on a mobile phone. The whole performance is streamed live or recorded, edited and offered in a P2P-network by this device.

## MOBILE PHONE MUSIC AND SOCIAL CHANGES

During the research for my Master’s thesis on the topic of mobile phone music in 2002/2003, I already found more than 100 pieces of art and artistic projects using the mobile phone – with only one tenth of these works actually being mobile phone music. Mobile phone music does not only make the changes in every day life an issue, but also the changes within society along with the spread of the mobile phones popularity: for example private conversations (calls) are more and more made in a public environment. This indicates the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private spheres, which has been shown by analysing *Dialtones* by Levin. The audience of the concert had to register their mobile phone number before the performance, in order to receive a specific ring tone and a seating assignment. Levin conducted his ensemble of mobile phones via a database containing this information. In the three movements of *Telesymphonie*, including a solo part,

up to 60 phones rang at the same time, forming diverse sound patterns.

The piece *Wählt die Signale!* ("Dial the signals!" 2003) by the artist group Ligna shows changes in the relation between individuality and collectivity brought along by the mobile phone. The participants of the *Radio concert for 144 mobile phones* could ring cell phones that were lying in a closed room at Hamburg's gallery for contemporary art. The result was a sound carpet of especially composed ring tones, which was broadcast live on radio.

Wagenaar's *Kadoum* (2000) addresses the relation between technology and the body. The heartbeats of 16 Australians were permanently monitored and sent to Europe via the participant's mobile phones. There the signals were used as basis for a sculpture, where the heartbeat of an Australian makes water pulsate in one bucket, hanging from a scaffolding. The heart frequencies were also used for a choral performance where each heartbeat controlled one singer in real time.

The fact that new social codes of communication are emerging through the use of the mobile phone is visible in *Text.FM* (2001) by the artists Fuller and Harwood. People could participate by sending a text message to a specific number. According to additional information concerning the type of voice desired, the messages were transformed by a speech synthesis software and broadcast live on radio.

Finally *Nanoloop i-mode* (2002) by Wittchow serves as an example to indicate the changes in the use of software and to have a brief look at mobile phone games. It is a sequencer for mobile phones allowing the user to use his or her phone as an instrument for minimal house music.

### **MOBILE PHONE MUSIC AND SOUND ART**

The artistic use of mobile phones can be discussed in the context of Sound Art. For my definition of sound art the following four aspects are crucial: firstly the applied technology or rather New Media, secondly intermediality, thirdly interactivity and finally space. All these four aspects are inherent to mobile phone music, but interaction and especially space are the most interesting ones.

The first aspect mentioned, **applied technology** is explained by the term mobile phone music. The mobile phone – originally developed for making phone calls – and its ring tones, actually serving to announce a call – are now used for artistic practise. It is fascinating to observe in how many different ways artists make use of it.

The second crucial aspect of sound art is **intermediality**. Mobile phone music is never only about listening – it is always about watching or using other senses as well. A lot of pieces use other media alongside the mobile phone. Two of the pieces discussed utilize the radio for example, another one a sculptural set-up.

**Interaction** through and with the mobile phone is another characteristic of works of mobile phone music. The recipients themselves can (more or less) control the shape a piece takes. They can interact with it and with others.

People always carry their mobiles with them. They are equipped them in an ideal way for works involving this mobile device. The mobile phone as an instrument of communication with an interface for in- and output offers diverse possibilities for interaction. Many interactive (music) installations have problems with audience participation. However, the mobile phone helps the audience to overcome inhibitions to join in. The interaction is not immediate but indirect via the mobile phone. This is revealed by the high level of participation in all described examples.

Mobility leads us to the fourth and last characteristic of sound art: **space**. Traditional concerts require a physical presence. The listener is allocated a seat and is supposed to stay there for the whole time. Installations also require a physical presence; however it is not limited to a special seat, but encompasses potentially the whole installation, in which you are (mostly) free to move around. In the case of net music the physical presence is obsolete. It is possible to participate from every linked computer anywhere in the world. Nevertheless the recipient is then bound to the computers location. How does mobile phone music compare? Physical presence at a specified location is not necessary, because the computer, that is the mobile phone, is located in the recipient's pocket. The user is free to move around, even more so than in an installation, potentially all over the world. The spatial concepts in installations as well as in net music both expand into mobile phone music. However, contrary to this potentially complete detachment from a performance space, artists instead make locality an intricate part of their work.

This is the case in a lot of pieces. Dialtones goes as far as demanding that the participants must be at specified locations with their mobile phones. *Text.FM* and *Wählt die Signale!* cooperate with local radio stations. And in *Kadoum* maximum spatial distance is represented by the heart frequencies from Australia.

Mobile phone music is not only dealing with real space, but also with virtual space. Mobile phone music musically links cyberspace to the real world. Music is brought back from cyberspace to real space. Virtual and real space can be connected in a new way. They can superimpose each other in formerly unknown ways. The data space is no longer disconnected from the real space.

If you would like to learn more about my research, send me an email, visit my Website or come to one of my talks, for example at *ISEA2004* in Helsinki where I will be part of the panel *Mobile sound and art practices: the local contexts*.