

# The canon of electroacoustic music – a possible concept?

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## Abstract

Canonicity is one of the most intensively debated issues in cultural sciences. However, the historical development of the word “canon” experienced different meanings under which there are the metaphors of a list and of a standard. Also in the history of electroacoustic music, some compositions of the past received a very high level of recognition and a special status for being essential. Therefore, a canonic concept implies an exclusion of other artworks which are not regarded for being essential. Because of this subjective selection, it is worthwhile to indicate it in the designation. But given the emerged juridical significance of the word “canon”, its further application as a linguistic term could be an obstruction to this which is why other expressions like “classics” or “anthology” should be under consideration as substitutes.

## 1. The history of the word “canon”

If we take a closer look at the pure history of the word “canon”, its origins are actually much older than Christianity and the publication of the bible. One important Semitic root is the Accadian word *qanû* which had a pure botanical meaning as the translation “reed” already suggests (Wallraff 27; Beekes 637). Very soon, the Greek language adopted this as the borrowed word *κανών* obtaining already from this point on the new metrical meaning of scale and standard (Sachs 1; Wallraff 27, 29). Consequently, the Latin translation *canon* emerged with its full theological severity in context with the *regula fidei*, the standard rule of belief (Wallraff 27). However, this normative function, which lasts until today, was not the only possible meaning of the word “canon” so that the clarity of its true definition is more indefinite than probably expected (Oppel 1-72). Another significance also established during the late antiquity is “canon” as an equivalent to a list or a synopsis (Wallraff 27). That would mean a narrative function as a configuration without any attempt to judge as such. This was invented in order to give a practical and comparative illustration of complex entities such as scale indications in the so called *πρόχειροι κανόνες*, the handy tables (Wallraff 28). Also historical contexts or even the bible were part of this concept as the famous synopsis from Origen in Figure 1, the so called *Ἐξαπλᾶ*, indicates with its columns of the Old Testament (Wallraff 32).

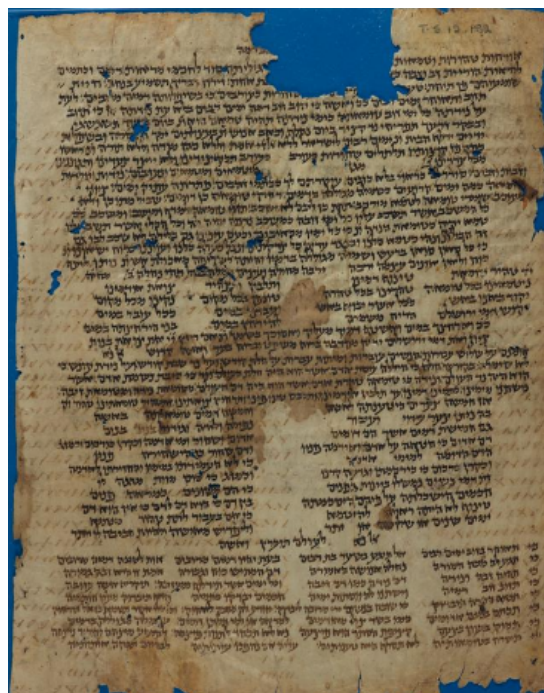


Figure 1: Palimpsest with the Hexpla-columns from Origen in the undertext. Cambridge University Library T-S 12.182. Photo reproduced with kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

The opposite of such selections would be an imaginary archive giving a chronological order of absolutely every achievement without any omission (Berger, “The Ends of Music History” 189; Eco 113-117; Shreffler 611). However, the example of historiography makes it clear that such an approach can easily reach its limits. In musical practice, this could be seen during the Middle Ages where theoretically every Saint needed to be addressed during the litany which was of course impossible and why a selection of Saints was used as a replacement (Wallraff 37).

The battle between the two meanings of “canon” seems to have been resolved quite early because the objective of simple listing was too primitive for many scholars to maintain so that the image of “canon” as a standard prevailed (Wallraff 28). Nonetheless, discussions about this ambiguity continued on and until today there is a controversy about the “true” meaning of the canonic concept (Sachs 1).<sup>1</sup> But also the meaningfulness of a standardized judgement itself was called into question from the beginning when so called “canonists” (*κανονικοί*) insisted in the tradition of Pythagoras on universal measurement of music and on the other hand, the “musicians” (*μουσικοί*) looked at sensory experience (Sachs 1). It is exactly this ancient dispute that causes the main concerns in the debates about canonicity. But the model of exemplary selection as such is still widely in use and in some cases even necessary as the examples of electroacoustic music demonstrate.

<sup>1</sup> The dispute about the two meanings came to an ostensible conclusion in 1936 due to theological positions (Sachs 36, Beyer 605).

## 2. Canonical concepts in electroacoustic music

In order to observe canonicity in electroacoustic music, one way could be to look at CD-publications.<sup>2</sup> Almost none of those uses the word “canon” explicitly. Instead, general expressions like *Les Espaces électroacoustiques* or *Israeli Electroacoustic Music* can be observed. But sometimes, other words in the descriptions can be found which are also heavily debated in cultural sciences like the term “masterpiece”. This expression suggests that the presented works have an exemplary function because of a superb quality. But by which means this class is exactly defined is not easy to identify. A further examination of the booklet texts is often necessary in order to decode the criterion for quality.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, it is the intent to represent a large sector of electroacoustic music like for example summarizing a development of 30 years. Another condition can be the requirement that all compositions have to be preserved at a prestigious institution which is used as a guarantee that the respective works are “relevant”. A further requirement could be a more specific parameter like high demands concerning interpretation and performance.

Nevertheless, almost any selection model immediately raises some questions: If it is for instance the intention to represent 30 years of history in electroacoustic music, is it then really necessary to refer to certain qualifications within the compositions? Are all pieces not displayed at superb institutions therefore irrelevant? It is probably not plausible to believe that canonic CD-publications want to discredit artworks. But the problem is that a lot of their designations claim generality through their title and expressions like the term “masterpiece” demonstrates. Linguistically, entire spaces of electroacoustic are claimed to be set out by a few pieces. Admittedly, parts of the descriptions in booklets often relativize such entitlements by letting through more specific selection criteria which can be subjective in contrast to the general declaration of many main titles. Even more questioning in this sense are second volumes of such CD-recordings because they often uphold the same selection criteria but this time listing different works. Hence, the first publication was by its own standards incomplete and thus open to supplement. These observations lead to one of the most fundamental characteristics of any canonic concept, namely its instability (Berger, “The Ends of Music History” 188). And this is at the same time another contradiction to the aforementioned claim of general representation asking in theory for some form of consistence.

A more lucid canon of electroacoustic music is the website [www.electrocanon.com](http://www.electrocanon.com) where a public vote is casted in order to establish a personal canon of electroacoustic music based on popularity, as pointed out: “Which acousmatic works have been the most significant or important to you?” Obviously, this is a progress in terms of a transparent focus on personal preference (Figure 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Two examples of electroacoustic music CD-publications are *Israeli Electroacoustic Music* (<https://folkways.si.edu/israeli-electroacoustic-music/contemporary-electronic-judaica/album/smithsonian>) and *Les Espaces Électroacoustiques* (<https://www.col-legno.com/de/shop/40002-les-espaces-electroacoustiques>).

<sup>3</sup> See for example the description text of *Les Espaces Électroacoustiques* in: <https://www.col-legno.com/de/shop/40002-les-espaces-electroacoustiques>.

The screenshot shows the website 'electrocanon' with a blue header. Below the header, the text reads 'The choice is yours!'. A green box contains the instructions: 'Which **acousmatic works** have been the most significant or important for you? Which are your **landmarks** of the acousmatic repertoire? What would you have your friends listen to? What would you take to a desert island? Enter your choices here: they will be compiled into a collaborative (and completely subjective) list of **milestones!**'. Below this, there are three input fields: 'Work title', 'Composer', and 'Optional: Why this work? (May be edited, compiled & posted/published...)'. A red 'Submit' button is at the bottom right. A small note at the bottom left says 'You can suggest up to 7 works.' and a language selector 'En' is in the top right corner.

Figure 2: The website www.electrocanon.com with personal preference as a criterion. Photo reproduced with kind permission.

But the linguistic problem of the expression “canon” still seems to maintain. Firstly, because the term is used in singular upholding the idea that there is “one definite” canonical concept. Secondly, because of the historical development of its meaning, the word “canon” always comes back to some reference of a standard which implies generality in its idea. As a means to neutralize some of the difficulties, a new designation could make a huge difference. For instance, instead of speaking of “the canon” it could be considered as “one *possible* canon”. With regard to the concept of the website www.electrocanon.com, an alternative title could be “a canon of personal preference”.

Whatever the solution might be, it is quite clear that the method of selection certain artworks as such does not have to be called into question since it is a necessary step for telling a story unless we try to refer to the unmanageable archive. With the aim of demonstrating this narrative configuration again, two possibilities of selective electroacoustic music history will be applied: The first one is the history of electroacoustic music with regard to the relation between music and language. This could include *Thema Omaggio a Joyce* from Luciano Berio, *Epitaph* from Herbert Eimert (Figure 3), *Eigentum, Recht und Freiheit* from Ludwig Rink and also the orchestra composition *Requiem für einen jungen Dichter* from composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann.

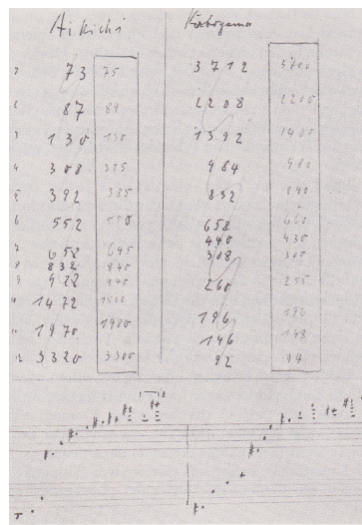


Figure 3: Relation of music and language in Herbert Eimert’s *Epitaph*: The two parts of the Japanese fisherman’s name *Aikishi Koboyama* are each connected with twelve frequencies indicated in the box. The corresponding pitches are notated below. © with kind permission from Universal Edition A.G. Vienna.

Of course, this list can’t be regarded as complete but nonetheless, it demonstrates a sector of electroacoustic music development regarding the relation between music and language. Another option of historical representation could be the aspect of notated electroacoustic music where works such as Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Studie II*, *Kontakte*, *Telemusik* and *Hymnen*, York Höller’s composition *Horizont* or Rainer Wehinger’s score of Györgi Ligeti’s *Artikulation* are exemplary.

As the two selections show, artworks don’t have to be well-known or often performed in a configuration. Though, every selection criterion of canonical models leads to the fundamental question of value judgement.

### 3. Canonical value judgement as a problem

Many scholars indicate different parameters for the assessment of canonical value. Among those are high quantities of public performance, public interest and scientific attention (Berger, “Five Canonical Theses” 47; Shreffler 615-616). Another possible precondition is the resumption of a specific compositional technique of a composer in later works from other artists (Berger, “Five Canonical Theses” 50-51). This results in the fact that an application of one of these standards does not lead to “one” correct canon but instead enables just a possibility of a wide variety of canonic entities. And because history goes on with different new achievements and techniques, each canonic option is only temporarily valid. Meanwhile, this amorphicity of canonic models stands in contrast to an evolved juridical custom of the word “canon”. Especially the adjective “canonic” can be found in such a context intensifying the issue of validity (Sachs 1; Wenger 1-194). If we stay with this alignment, we can find a juridical definition of the goal of value in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good: hence it has been well said that the Good is That at which all things aim” (Aristotle 1094a; von Leyden 5-6). Thus, in order to fulfill the canonic condition in electroacoustic music according to this thesis, we have to establish the pursuit of good. Maybe certain attempts to do this can be



quite successful with respect to the aspect of a serialistic intention for example. But a general “good” of electroacoustic music history is hard to define. Thereby it is exactly this juridical method of canonical judgement which seems to cause most of the problems. Meanwhile, judgement and values are not that troublesome as such as long as they have a relative and subjective declaration without the entitlement of universality (Hentschel 76-77). This can be shown in practice in Figure 4 where a Dutch publication of a selection of poems takes the editor right in the headline through the grammatical possessive case. Hence, this is no general canon but a personal subjective canon from the author Gerrit Komrij which is less presumptuous.

To draw a final conclusion for the question here, rather a canonic concept is possible for electroacoustic music, we have to be fair to say that the two different functions of a canon – the narrative configuration on the one hand and the judgement on the other – are hardly to deny even for contemporary art. But to label this with a word having a difficult history of meanings and experiencing juridical intensification is probably one of the main causes of difficulty in the debate of canonicity. While some scholars suggest a new definition of the word “canon” or a differentiation of individual canonic models, it is the belief in this article that changing the semantics of a term widely in use could be beyond the realms of possibility. Instead, the renunciation of this term and of expressions like “masterpiece” can open up new ways through replacement with words like “classics” or “anthology”. Of course, it is not easy to renew a concept which has survived since the Antiquity in many sciences and arts. And in addition to this, another reason why canonicity has continued on is probably its convenience, as it has been shown in the handy tables in the beginning. But the benefit of leaving the comfort zone could be an advance not just to other opinions but also to other artworks that might be still underestimated and can enrich the world of electroacoustic music.

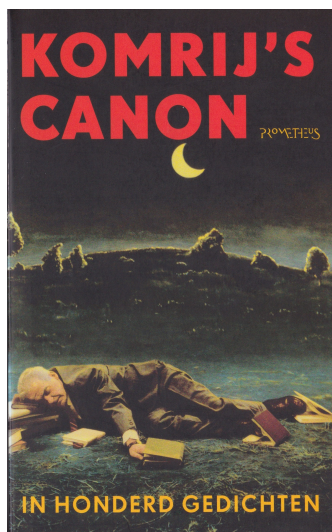


Figure 4: Cover of Gerrit Komrij’s *Komrij’s Canon*, published by Prometheus, Amsterdam in 2008. Photo reproduced with kind permission.

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