

## **Towards a Taxonomy of Electroacoustic Music: Dialectic Continuums as Compositional Tools**

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### **Abstract**

Within electroacoustic music much attention has been paid to issues of dualism and categorisation. Two prominent examples of dualistic categorisation being: Simon Emmerson's creation of a language grid (1986) and Denis Smalley's spectromorphology (1986), with particular reference to its emphasis on gesture/texture. These discussions are a product of the view that the conventional notation and classification system used in traditional Western Art music is inadequate. Leigh Landy places spectromorphology with the language grid and many other prospective means of classification and analysis (including dualistic pairs) stating that: 'a more rigorous classification system is needed' (2008).

This paper seeks to enter this debate by highlighting the potential value of a



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several levels of classification composed of different family groups. In this case my taxonomy is a set of musical parameters, or perhaps possibilities, that consciously or unconsciously are chosen by the composer.

Viewing pieces of sound art through this system of musical parameters allows for a broad spectrum of pieces



If we take 'Fixed Media' (music that is unalterable in its presentation) we can surmise that 'Live' performance (music that is fully realised in performance) would sit at its opposite side on a continuum.<sup>2</sup> After abstracting the continuum of Live/Fixed, we may draw a new category more specific by one level from the live half of the spectrum. In this case I propose that such a continuum should be Improvised/Interpreted and because we have already defined the work as being broadly concerned with 'liveness', we can be more specific by one level. In this case, interpreted would involve working from a specific set of guidelines, perhaps a traditional score for example, whilst improvised would lean towards more freedom for the performer. Given that all of these continuums concern the performance of a work we would then collect these under a family grouping named, somewhat unsurprisingly: Performance, see figs. 7 and 8. Other researchers have emphasised the importance of looking at different aspects of a work and as Landy has suggested:

[...] one [should] look at three aspects of a work: 1) the context of a work (placement, how it is performed/presented/heard); 2) creative practice (how it has been constructed, composition intention); and 3) listening experience (which aspects of the music are easy to hold on to and how do we listen to the work [more focused on the sound sources, more focused on the sounds' musical qualities]). (Landy, 2012:18)

The system's currently designated family groups of continuums broadly

conforms to Landy's assertion and consist of:

1. Performance – The mode of reception of a work (live aspects, performance space, speaker format, score).
2. Sound source – Sonic characteristics of the sound but primarily the sonic material initially used to create the work e.g. synthesis or field recordings.
3. Language – Tonality or otherwise of a work, whether it conveys extra musical meaning, its syntax.
4. Form – The structural elements of a work, whether it contains more than one type of media, movements, its duration.
5. Production – The technical and human aspects of a work's creation, for example: collaboration, stochastic (or chance) processes, whether it is composed by commission or not (a film score for instance), perhaps whether it is a manipulated recording of a live process.

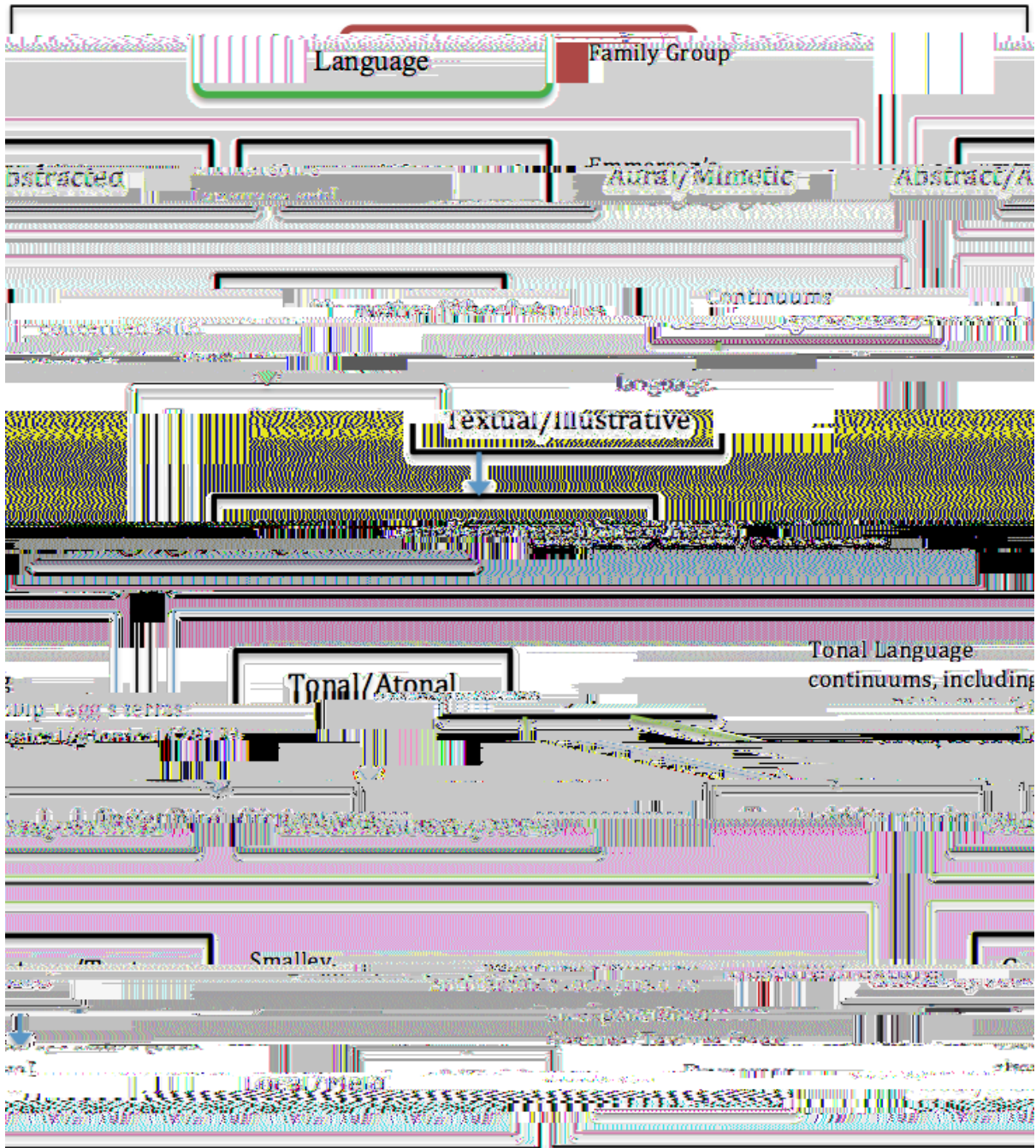
It is worth noting that, through the incorporation of note based continuums within the language family group, the system attempts to take into account Landy's assertion that:

In a sense sound-based music can be found at the end of a continuum that has note-based music at its other end. Many pieces of music move along this continuum or can be found to focus on a point somewhere in the middle. (Landy, 2012:Xii [preface])

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**Figure 10. Outline of the Language family group**

Termination points of trees: in other words, at what point should other systems take over or more specifically perhaps understanding already in the discourse.

Some dualistic pairings are seemingly self-contained having no obvious child continuums, for example: Site Specific/Mobile.

The system can be used to highlight and direct towards other author's research and direct students fresh to electroacoustic music towards research related to their compositional choices.

Switch dualisms: i.e. either on or off without grey areas, for example: single author/Collaboration.

Subjective nature of some continuums.



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To start with a quote from Marion Guck: “music theory has always fed on new music” (Guck, 1994:85). Guck’s quote here highlights the importance of practice informing theory and the use of the system in my compositional practice has been stimulating and beneficial. So far it has been most

productive as a conceptual framework for my decision

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